



NEXUS

MARY CALMES

I

SOMETIMES there were just not enough hours in the day, and no matter what I did, I could not get everything done. I had gotten extra pressure when my boyfriend—partner, the man I would take a bullet for—had told me we had to go out of town to his grandfather’s eightieth birthday party. Due to the fact that I was a senior associate at the law firm where I practiced, I had to work extra long and extra late to clear my schedule so I could get away. As a result of that, we had not been able to fly out together, but I had made sure we would be sitting side by side for the trip home. Holding the man’s hand during takeoff and landing—he was a nervous flyer—was really something I enjoyed.

Getting off the plane at the Blue Grass Airport in Lexington, Kentucky, I made my way down the stairs toward the baggage claim. I turned my phone on as I walked and called my sentinel, Jael Ezran. Along with practicing law, I was also a warder, which meant I hunted and killed things that went bump in the night. I stood between people and the demon horde along with my fellow warders—five of us altogether—with our sentinel Jael Ezran. Every city had five warders and one sentinel to lead them. Every night we took to the streets in pairs, one of us rotating to have a night, or more than one, off. If there wasn’t much going on, only two went out. If there was a lot of activity, then Jael patrolled with us and we’d be out in teams of two or three. It just depended on the creatures from the pit.

But in the light of day, I would normally be at work doing the lawyer thing at Kessler, Torrance and Price. I would be a partner soon, Mrs. Kessler had told me. She liked me, the board liked me, and the fact that my caseload was the heaviest of the associates and my win record was close to perfect had put me over the top. And I was pleased—tired but pleased—that I had proven myself beyond a shadow of a doubt to be one of the men who would see to the firm’s enduring legacy. And now I had been told to catch my breath.

It was not in my nature to rest on my laurels once I had shown what I was capable of, but to my surprise, it was what the other partners at the firm

wanted. Everyone strongly suggested I take on fewer clients, the consensus being that they wanted me around for the long haul, not burned out at thirty-five. They hoped I could now enjoy my time off, so that when I was at work, I would be 100-percent invested and not worried about missing out on time with my partner, the wonderful guy they got to see and talk with at every company function. Lately I had been offered time-shares, cabins in Aspen, villas on Lake Cuomo, and a cabana in Tahiti. They wanted me to stay, and they knew me well enough to know that if Joseph Locke was happy, I was happy too. Over the years, after seeing how everyone at the firm responded to the man I loved, I was so glad I had gone with my gut.

I had been courted by many firms out of law school but had decided on a smaller, more prestigious one many of my peers had promised would never promote me. I was gay, I was black—it would never happen. But I had sat with the managing partner and owner, Helene Kessler, and looked in her eyes, and her gaze was unwavering when she spoke candidly about my future and what she could see for me if I worked hard and made a believer out of her. She wanted me because of my brain. The rest—color, sexual orientation, even the car I drove—meant nothing.

As time passed, I saw that my decision had been the best one I could have made. I was proud that I worked for a law firm that had no concerns with the fact that I lived with and loved another man. I had heard horror stories from some of my fellow attorneys at other firms and could only say that, in my experience, there had been no problem with my homosexuality. Helene Kessler ran her firm based on performance, end of story. She didn't really give a damn *who* you slept with... except for her brother-in-law Ray. The man in question was who I had just finished defending, and the people in his bed were of paramount importance to her.

I had been called to her office two days ago, and unlike our usual meetings, she was not sitting at her desk and inviting me to do the same. She was instead standing at her window, watching the rain pelt the glass. When she turned and looked at me, her eyes were clouded.

“Mrs. Kessler,” I said softly, gently, crossing the room to her side.

“Helene,” she corrected as she had been lately.

It would be strange to start calling her by her first name, but as she had become insistent, I had to honor her wishes. “Helene,” I acquiesced.

Silently, she passed me a file folder, and I was surprised to realize I was looking at the arrest sheet of her sister’s husband. I started flipping through it immediately.

“He needs to seek treatment for sex addiction and drug addiction,” she told me, her voice flat and hard like it never was.

I skimmed the contents. Her brother-in-law was found with copious amounts of cocaine and with one—no, two—prostitutes, and—

“Ray was discovered with three escorts....” She trailed off.

“Where was—oh,” I said, because I finally saw the name of the third girl, woman—no, girl, just barely eighteen. Christ.

“Passed out, all four of them. The hotel manager called the police when there was no answer in the room after check-out time, and when he went in no one would wake up.” She took a breath. “Ray needs to be confined to a hospital so he can be treated,” she sighed. “His wife, my sister, is just....” She looked at me, saw me squinting at her. “Oh God, Marcus, we both know I was thinking of a judgeship, and now this? Jesus, I just need it to go away. I got it on Judge Rojas’s docket for the morning, so.... Just keep him out of jail, throw him in a psychiatric facility, and have them try and cure him of being a sex addict. Lock him up and throw away the key. I don’t give a damn, just—”

“I’ll handle it,” I promised, hand on her shoulder.

She nodded, covering my hand with hers for the briefest of moments before she started rubbing the bridge of her nose under her glasses, a quirk of hers when she was nervous.

“It won’t go away,” I said honestly. “But we’ll deal with it as quickly and quietly as we can. I promise you won’t have to deal with it. I’ll take care of everything.”

“I know you will,” she said. “You’re the only one I trust.”

I was pleased to hear it, and when I had gone straight to her office after court that morning, she had been waiting for me.

“It’s done. He’s in a treatment program, and he’ll do his time, six months, at that facility.”

She nodded, waiting.

“Your sister was there,” I said gently. “She cried a lot.”

“She’s an idiot.”

“You can’t help who you love.”

“Oh no?”

I shook my head. “You married the perfect man, and he died too soon, and I’m going to say this to you because we’re friends, aren’t we?”

“Of course,” she snapped. “Do you think I spend my holidays with just anyone?”

I smiled at her. “Now listen. It’s time, you know. Woman does not live by work alone.”

“Time to do what?”

“Date.”

“Bite your tongue,” she chided me, getting up and walking to the huge window in her enormous corner office.

“We’ll work on it.”

She made a dismissive noise.

“Don’t push me. I’ll have Joe call you.”

Her head turned so she could see me over her shoulder. “You and I both know that he’s irresistible. Please don’t sic him on me.”

“Well, then, I want to see you take a man to the opera fund-raiser in two weeks. If I have to go, you have to have a date.”

She grunted and did a quick turn so her back was against the glass. “What else about Ray?”

“If he messes up again, he’s going to do time, and there’s nothing you’ll be able to do about it.”

“Okay.”

“I talked to Weber Ford at the *Chronicle*, and he said he’d bury it as far back as he can.”

“Thank you.”

“You can’t be blamed for your family.”

“Oh, yes I can. Everything they do reflects on me.”

“It’ll be all right.”

“Or it won’t, but I refuse to just cover it up and end up owing the wrong people too much. It’s not worth my soul.”

“No. It’s not.”

“Thank you, Marcus. I’ll look forward to having you as a senior member of this firm.”

My gaze settled on hers in question.

“It’s time. We both know it is. Everyone here knows it is. You’ve worked hard; you’re the only one at this firm that every board member believes in. We’re voting Friday. I’ll have good news for you when you get back from your trip to... I’m sorry. Where are you going again?”

I chuckled. "Kentucky."

Her face scrunched up tight. "What on earth for?"

"It's great there, actually, and Joe's grandfather is turning eighty."

"I suspect he's not the draw, but instead your charming partner."

I arched a brow. "You think Joe's charming?"

She laughed then, for the first time in days. "Yes, Marcus, I certainly do."

"Huh."

"Marcus."

A voice saying my name brought me from my thoughts and into the present. The phone had been picked up on the other end, but not by Jael, because he would have called me by my warder name, Marot, and not my given name. There was also the voice itself to take into account. What I was being treated to was a sound much softer, smoother, richer, a smoky tenor in comparison to the usual growl of my sentinel.

"Ryan," I said, knowing the man's voice as well as my own. He had been my fellow warder a long time.

"Hey."

"Tell Jael I landed in Lexington and I'm good, all right?"

"Will do." He yawned first and ended with a sigh.

"Why're you there?"

"Jael is thinking he wants to cook when Deidre's warders come to visit next week."

I wasn't going to touch that one. "I'm sorry?"

“Well, you know that Deidre Macauley, the sentinel he’s been seeing from Edinburgh? She is having her warders fly over here to meet Jael, and he was thinking it would be a good idea to show them how well he could take care of her, so he was going to cook.”

“Okay.”

“Yeah, see, Malic thought the same thing. He thought Jael should have the dinner catered or take everyone out, and then the warders could see that he actually has money and can provide well for their sentinel.”

Being a sentinel, being a warder, was not a paid gig. Some sentinels and some warders were nowhere near the top of the food chain. Because of Jael’s inheritance and some very shrewd investing, his family fortune had grown tenfold in his lifetime. He could provide Deidre with quite a nice life, if that was what she wanted. Having met the lady, however, I knew that no man would ever have to take care of her. It would be nice for him to show off for her warders, though.

“I don’t get the cooking.”

“Neither do I, but whatever.”

“So you’re there teaching him how to cook something.”

“Yep.”

“Should I even ask what?”

“No, don’t ask. You don’t wanna know.”

I laughed at him because he sounded so pained. “Sorry,” I chuckled. “Just tell the big man I’m okay, and I’ll see you in a week.”

“What are you doing there again?”

“Joe’s grandfather’s birthday.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

Something occurred to me. “Maybe Deidre’s warders would like the idea of him cooking, of her being more involved with a man who treated his own warders like family—maybe that’s what’s up with the cooking.”

There was a moment of silence before he answered me. “Christ, it must be exhausting to be you, thinking about everything all the time.”

I grunted.

“I’ll call you if anyone dies,” he said.

“That’s not funny,” I told him.

“Did you pack your swords, or did you leave them at home?”

“Why would I pack my swords to come to a birthday party?”

“It *is* Kentucky.”

“So lemme get this straight. You’ve been all over the world, *Mr. I-Used-To-Be-A-Model*, but you think Lexington is some hick town where packing hook swords would be a good idea?”

“I have no idea.”

“I know you don’t. You’re just talking out of your ass.”

He huffed. Normally he wasn’t like that; he was thoughtful, not prejudiced against a place he didn’t know. Something was wrong.

“Are you going to tell me?” I asked.

“Tell you what?”

I stayed quiet and waited.

“It’s nothing.”

“Sure.”

“I’m just irritated.” He sighed deeply, breaking down. “One of Deidre’s warders, Collin something, artistic type with A Flock of Seagulls haircut, is already here, and I’m thinking from the looks of things that he finds my boyfriend somewhat appealing.”

If I were there, I would have wished Collin with the ’80s retro haircut good luck. No one was taking Ryan Dean’s hearth away from him... no one. And since Ryan was the kind of gorgeous that people stopped on the street to watch walk by, he really had nothing to worry about. But he loved Julian Nash desperately, so it wasn’t all that surprising that he was worried. It was, however, needless.

“You know, I’ve actually met Julian,” I soothed him. “He’s kind of the loyal type.”

“No, I know. It’s just... where does Collin get off disrespecting me?”

“I doubt he realizes he is. He just sees an attractive man he knows has the strength to be the hearth of a warder, and so he’s interested. I’ll bet you it’s no more than that.”

He grunted on the other end.

As a rule, Ryan was not volatile, but having a hearth was still new for him. He and Julian had yet to hit six months.

“How do you not try and kill anyone that comes near Joe?”

“You trust your hearth, Ry. The man is my home just like Julian is yours.”

He exhaled, and I understood that he had been more upset than I realized, and now he was calmer. “Okay.”

“Good.” I smiled into the phone. “Call me if you want to talk some more or if you need help hiding the body.”

“Will do,” he sighed, and he hung up.

I turned the corner, putting my phone back in the breast pocket of my suit jacket as I crossed the baggage claim area.

“Marcus.”

I stopped and looked around but saw no one I knew.

“Honey, maybe that’s not—”

“It is, El. I know his walk.”

“But the only guy there is a black guy.”

Black guy?

“Ohmygod,” I heard the man I loved say in mock-shock. “Marcus is black?”

“Joey!”

I finally saw a woman peeking out at me from behind a large pillar and began walking over to her. As the room opened up, I saw more pillars and benches beside them. My partner, Joseph Locke, was sitting on one and across from him were his mother and father and sister.

“Marcus! Honey!”

They could have been on a poster for all-American wholesome goodness, the Locke family in all their glory.

“Marcus,” Joe called to me, louder than his mother.

“I hear you,” I called over to him so he’d know.

“Then hurry the hell up,” he grumbled.

Had he been able to see me, he would have seen my scowl, but he couldn’t, so I had to wait and smack him once I got there.

“Christ, Marcus,” he growled when I clipped him on the shoulder.

“You deserve that,” his father rumbled, an older, taller version of the man I loved. He had dark brown hair and the same pale eyes that had been gifted to his son. “Learn some patience.”

“I haven’t had coffee,” I warned Joe, “so don’t screw with me.”

He grunted.

“Yes,” his mother agreed, standing up to hug me. “Leave Marcus alone.”

Her I liked. It was my boyfriend who was the grouch.

“How ya doin’, Deb?” I asked as I enfolded her in my arms.

I loved to look at my boyfriend’s mother: her dark blue eyes; short, wavy blonde hair; and sweet smile. I could see her in Joe, and I liked that.

She squeezed me tight, arms around my neck, and kissed my cheek, breathing out some tension. We had always gotten along well, even at our first meeting. I was always a big hit with parents; the word “lawyer” worked wonders.

“How was your flight?” Deb asked, leaning back to look up at my face, her arms dropping off my shoulders and resting on my chest. She was comfortable standing there in the circle of my arms. I was as much her kid as either Barbara or Joe, and that had been making me happy since I met her five, almost six years ago. I had lost my own mother when I was fifteen, so she was the only one I had.

“I had ‘the guy’ sitting next to me, you know, that ‘guy’, the one who wants to chat.”

“On the redeye.” She was annoyed for me. “My goodness, why didn’t he just let you get some sleep?”

“I know why,” Joe grumbled.

“Shhh,” I shushed him.

“Oh honey, you didn’t tell him you were a lawyer, did you?”

“That’s not the reason, Mother,” Joe snapped irritably.

“It was,” I lied, smiling suddenly, leaning to kiss her cheek. “I think he overheard me on the phone before we boarded.”

“How rude,” she continued.

“I’m never letting you fly alone again,” Joe muttered.

I ignored the love of my life in favor of his mother. “You look great by the way.”

“Guys hitting on you—what the hell, you wear a ring, for crissakes!”

“And I really love the haircut,” I continued.

“Finally!” she almost shouted. “Somebody noticed.”

“You got a haircut?” Barbara asked, sounding shocked.

Deb’s exasperated snort made everyone laugh as she gave me a last squeeze before releasing me to her husband, who came up behind her to hug me as well. I liked that my boyfriend’s father didn’t just shake my hand; it was nice that he had to hug me too.

“How are you, Marcus?” he asked when he let me go and looked up at my face. “You took the redeye out, huh? Tired?”

I groaned. “Yes, sir, but just get some coffee and food in me, and I’ll be ready to go.”

“Good.” He smiled before he stepped sideways so Joe’s sister Barbara could hug me.

I lifted Barbara Locke off her feet and crushed her against me.

“God, Marcus,” she giggled as I put her down, her hands on my face. “Why can’t I find one like you?”

“Oh sweetie, don’t worry. There’s the perfect guy out there just waiting for ya.”

And there was. Barbara was smart and funny and classically beautiful with big blue eyes and high cheekbones and full lips. If I were straight, she would have been mine. But as it was, her brother was the one I pined for.

“Suck-up,” Joe said under his breath.

“Joseph,” Barbara snapped at him as she stepped back beside her mother.

“Did you guys at least give him a snack this morning?” I asked his sister.

“No, so that’s why he’s like this. He needs food, and coffee too.”

“Marcus, honey, let me introduce you to Ellen—”

“Wait,” Joe snapped, reaching for me.

I grasped the questing hand, wrapping mine around it, noticing as always the warmth and the strength of his grip. This was not a man who sat in an office all day. He worked with his hands and he worked hard. As the owner and operator of Bumpy Road Limited, he could have taken a less physical role in his company, but he considered himself and everyone he employed to be part of the same team. He stocked shelves, talked to vendors, and called on accounts. He did every job in his company equally, which was why, I was certain, he was so beloved.

I squatted down beside the bench, hand on his knee as I looked up into his gorgeous clear blue eyes.

They were the first things I had ever noticed about him. They were pale, almost opaque cerulean with flecks of India ink in them. I had been out drinking, had turned to head back to the table from the bar—there to buy the last round—and he had suddenly been in front of me, and I was swallowed up in his gaze.

I had forgotten to breathe.

“You have a great laugh,” he’d told me. “I’ve been listening to it all night.”

I had tilted my head, realizing almost instantly that he was blind. “That’s the worst pick-up line I’ve ever heard.” I smiled at him.

“Are you sure?” he teased me. “The very worst?”

The arch of his eyebrow was wicked, his dimples were sweet, and his plump parted lips, wet now as he licked them, were making my cock hard. The man made my mouth go dry.

I’d noticed the way the light hit his auburn hair, a play of brown and red. I’d appreciated the splatter of freckles across the bridge of his short, upturned nose and had seen the way his eyes narrowed seductively, the long, thick feathery lashes hooding them. I’d heard the soft moan under his breath. I’d wondered, with the part of my brain that was still working, why someone had not put a ring on the man’s finger. That fast, I thought I might want to keep him.

He knew what he was about, because standing there, head tilted, waiting, cute and sexy all at once, he’d had an agenda. I liked that. Men who played games, who weren’t sure what they wanted, were not for me. With the no-nonsense attitude he had going, already he had my undivided attention. I’d let my gaze go everywhere, missing no part of him. He was smaller than me, leaner-muscled, prettier, but solid and strong. I liked the daring tip of his head, his lips that were pale and pink and full, and the effect I had on his breathing. He was holding onto the back of the bar stool beside him, flexing and un-flexing his hand, waiting to see what I would say. As if there were ever any doubt. I wanted to *eat* him.

“I’m Marcus Roth,” I said hoarsely.

He let out a breath and thrust his hand at me. “Joseph Locke.”

I took the offered hand in mine, holding tight. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“And you,” he said, stepping forward, inhaling me.

I had thought that because he couldn’t see that he would be timid about his desire, as well as reticent to trust. But the man knew what he wanted, and when he’d asked me to get something to eat with him, I’d found that I couldn’t say yes fast enough. I liked the laugh lines in the corner of his eyes, found myself charmed by his rakish grin, and felt my pulse jump at the way he laced his fingers into mine. I was a big guy, six six, two hundred and fifty pounds of hard, heavy muscle; I was normally not on the receiving end of possessiveness. But Joe couldn’t see me, and so he didn’t know that he didn’t need to stake his claim in front of other people. He was all of five ten, trying to yank me after him wherever we went. I had been charmed completely.

Now five, almost six years later, he still had to show anyone who was looking that I belonged to him.

“I knew it was you,” he sighed as his hand slipped around the nape of my neck, pulling me closer to him. “I told my cousin, but she didn’t believe me.”

The man’s sightless eyes were really the most beautiful shade of blue I had ever seen. And I could gaze at them endlessly and enjoy them without him ever flushing with embarrassment and looking away. His eyes warmed me, and I was certain, everyone who ever met him.

“Yeah, well, it’s a damn parlor trick that you can tell a person by their frickin’ walk, so who could blame her?”

She gasped, but Joe and his family, the people who knew me and got me, started laughing instantly.

I arched an eyebrow for poor Ellen, who was the only one not getting the joke.

Deb was snickering as she looked at me with smiling eyes. “I’m so glad you’re here. Joe’s been missing you,” she finished, patting my shoulder.

“I’m so embarrassed.”

I turned my head to look at Ellen, who was now standing on the other side of Joe.

“I didn’t mean to imply that—I just, no one told me that you were—”

“Black?” I asked her.

“Oh God,” she groaned, head in her hands.

Poor girl, she was turning a very vibrant shade of red. Joe’s father Elliot started laughing. Deb put her hand over her mouth, and Barbara giggled.

“What I meant to say—”

“Is that you were not expecting me to be black,” I teased her unrelentingly.

She opened her mouth to say something but shut it fast.

“I’m kidding.” I smiled wide. “You know that, right?”

She looked horrified.

“Oh sweetie,” I soothed her, standing up, lifting out of Joe’s embrace. “I—”

“Marcus’s friends didn’t expect me to be blind,” Joe cut me off, sounding annoyed. “But he’s the catch, not me, so if everyone could just drop it, I would love it.”

The area went silent, and I shook my head. It had been playful until he made it not so, and that wasn’t usual. There was actually something eating at him.

I leaned forward, offering my hand to his cousin. “Marcus Roth, pleasure to meet you.”

She surged forward, grasping my hand in both of hers. “I’m Ellen Rowe, and the pleasure is all mine, Marcus.”

I smiled at Ellen to reassure her and saw her stare at me. I forgot sometimes that to some people, an interracial couple was cause for surprise. For Joe's parents and his sister, it had never been an issue. And they didn't need to understand why I wanted to date him; the question was why more people didn't. They got that Joe was a catch and loved me because I realized it as well. There was no dysfunction in my boyfriend's family, and I was thankful for them all.

"Everyone in your family is nicer than you," I told my boyfriend to make him smile.

He just scowled.

I could see how uncomfortable he was making everyone feel, so I reached out and put my fingers through his thick hair, dragging it back from his face. "Lighten up, Joey."

"Sit down for a second," he almost whined. "Dad, can you get Marcus's garment bag, please, and his duffle? They're the Louis Vuitton ones, and the tag has his business card on it. If the tag came off, there's another one in a pocket in the back in Braille."

"Course," the older man said, turning to go.

"Elliot, I'll get it," I called out to him.

He waved at me to stay put, though, and then mouthed words at me. I read that Joe was upset? I looked up at Deb.

She cleared her throat. "This weekend has a lot of outdoor activities like horseback riding and a touring distillery and dancing at a friend's house. I think Joe was slightly concerned about all that he would be able to do."

And even as I nodded I realized that there was no way that this bit of news was what had my boyfriend in a twist. Joe was always up for anything, and he accepted help whenever he needed to. Something else was wrong.

I sank down onto the bench beside him, and instantly his knee was against mine.

“I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Me too, baby,” I told him. Normally, at home in San Francisco, I would have put my arm around him and given him a kiss, but we were not there, and I didn’t feel comfortable here.

“Marcus?” Ellen smiled at me.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“How long have you and Joe been dating? He didn’t get a chance to tell me.”

“We don’t date,” Joe answered before I could. “We live together, have lived together for over four years. We’re partners. We have a civil union and rings.” He held up his left hand for her so she could see the thick gold ring. It was engraved inside, just as mine was, with our initials and the date we had made our love official in front of a crowd of our best friends and Joe’s parents and sister. So far, it had been the happiest day of my life.

“Oh.” She looked suitably educated.

“We dated for a year, and then he begged me to move in with him, and I said yes.”

“Begged?” I groused at him.

His lopsided grin, the one he gave me often, was suddenly there doing the wicked thing to his eyes where they heated and softened at the same time. I noticed that he hadn’t shaved and found the face I knew even sexier than usual.

“And what is it you do, Marcus?” Ellen asked me.

Joe supplied the answer before I could. “He’s a criminal lawyer at one of the biggest firms in San Francisco. He will make partner this year, the

youngest in the firm's history."

And that was it. She was impressed.

I leaned sideways as the women started talking. "Could you stop being an ass now, please?"

Joe ran his fingers over my jaw, and I watched him suck in his breath. Someone had definitely been missing being in bed with me.

"What's with you?" I asked, dropping my voice low, making it sound sultry on purpose.

"I just... I don't like it when I don't touch you every day. I think my mind started playing tricks on me, and besides, it's really hard to sleep without you."

Which I liked more than I would confess.

"I'm used to having your hands on me at night."

And that fast, as it always happened, I felt the blood rushing to my groin. "Jesus, Joey," I groaned softly.

"When we get back to my folks' place, promise you'll hold me down and fuck me."

I was suddenly awash in memories of his head thrown back, eyes closed, his skin moist and feverish, pale against the dark that mine was. I was seriously uncomfortable. "Baby, please, you're gonna make things awkward for me if you don't stop."

The throaty laughter didn't help.

"I wish we didn't have to meet everyone for breakfast," he told me, hand slipping under the collar of my sweater to the skin underneath. "I'd rather just go back to the house with.... God, your skin's warm."

I loved him all squirmly and needy, the ache in his voice, the way he clutched at me.

“I’ll make it up to you tonight.”

“You don’t have to make anything up,” he sighed, fingers like the touch of butterfly wings over my face. “Just make sure you get in bed with me. Stay with me.”

“I will. I’m all yours,” I said, sliding my thumb over the silky curve of his bottom lip. I released a deep breath as what he said finally registered. “Wait, what do you mean your mind is playing tricks on you?”

I got the “Joe face,” the squinting, the head tipping, all of it designed to make me drop whatever I had asked about.

“Joseph,” I pressed.

He scoffed. “Fine. I think I hurt this guy at my dad’s shop.”

“What guy?”

“A guy who came in to try and get money.”

I was so lost. “What?”

“I gotta fill you in later. Dad didn’t even want me to tell you at all because he’s worried that you’ll want him to go to the police.”

What the hell was going on? “Joe,” I growled. “Tell me now.”

“I can’t,” he insisted, “not in front of my folks or Barb or El.”

And he wouldn’t tell, no matter what I said or threatened him with. But I could skip to the second problem. “Hurt him how?”

“Hurt who?”

“You said you hurt some guy at your—are you listening to me?”

“Of course.”

“So how did you—”

“I accidentally touched him.”

“You touched some guy at your dad’s store and hurt him?”

“Yeah.”

“Hurt him how?”

“You *know* how, Marcus.”

And just like that, I was tense. “Honey, we both know that there would only be one reason why you touching anyone would hurt them.”

The branding touch.

A warder could hurt a demon just by touching them. The same was true for the hearth of a warder. As a hearth carried the heart of a warder in their hand, that same hand touching a demon made their skin sizzle. It was a demonic litmus test. If my boyfriend touched you and it burned, you were a preternatural creature from the pit. There was nothing else you could be.

“How do you know?” I whispered.

“On the way out, the guy bumped me, and when I reached out to get my balance, I touched him, and he yelled,” he said, his fingers curling into mine. “He scared the crap outta me.”

“Okay.” I took a breath. “And this guy was there to extort money from your father.”

“Marcus,” he said sharply.

“Fine, but he was, yes?”

“Yes.”

“And what did you do?”

“I told him not to come back.”

“You threatened him.”

“This is my father we’re talking about, Marcus.”

“Were you scared?”

“Terrified.”

But I would bet the guy had no idea. “You’re amazing.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes,” I said, taking his hand in both of mine, holding tight. “Who’s the guy?”

“His name was Arcan,” he said. “I heard my Dad say it.”

“Arcan what?”

“Just Arcan. He told me after that that’s all there was.”

One name, unless you were Cher or Madonna, was not a good thing. A singular name, a guy that Joe had hurt just with a touch of his hand, added up to demon.

“Did this guy say anything to you?”

“He told me he would find out who I belonged to.”

Which meant he had not mistaken Joe for a warden but knew exactly what he was.

“I told him to go to hell.”

“Baby.” I took a breath because he was scaring me. “Why would you—”

“Because you were coming, Marcus,” he cut me off. “I’m not scared of anything when you’re with me.”

God, the faith the man had in me. I put an arm around his shoulders, leaned him against me, and breathed him in.

“You deserve every bit of it,” he told me, turning to wrap his arms around my neck. “You’ve never done anything for me not to trust you or believe in you.”

My heart hurt just holding him, looking at him. “I need you to stay close to me, you understand?”

He nodded.

“Okay,” I said, calming.

“Maybe he won’t come back.” He was trying to soothe me further. “I mean, maybe he’s scared, huh?”

I saw him swallowing down his fear, forcing a smile for good measure.

“Right?”

“Yes,” I assured him.

“All right, everybody, let’s go eat.”

Elliot came back with my bags, and I stood and took the garment bag from him as Joe rose and leaned into me. With one arm around him, we followed his father toward the parking lot.

II

THE person who provided a home for a warder, the one who loved them and grounded them and centered them, was their hearth. Being the hearth of a warder was not something to be taken lightly, and while a warder could seal their home, keeping his mate safe within their sanctuary, if a hearth was attacked outside, he or she had little defense but the one they could offer with whatever skills they naturally possessed. Added to that was the branding touch. If a hearth was truly loved, when a demon came to take or harm them, they could burn the demon. It was the same power a warder had, but where a warder used it to inflict pain and then go in for the kill, a hearth used it for surprise so they could run. Joe was telling me that with the defense of a hearth, he had accidentally hurt a stranger.

Or thought he had.

“I might be crazy,” he told me as we sat together in the back of the van. His parents were in the front, Barbara and Ellen behind them, and Joe and I were allowed to have a little privacy after four days apart.

“We both know you’re not. Just spill it,” I ordered him, taking his hand in mine, lifting it to my lips, kissing his knuckles.

He whimpered softly, and I could not help the smile. Here we were talking about something scary, and all I could think about was getting him under me and how good he would feel.

“Say you missed me.”

“I told you on the phone last night,” I sighed, leaning sideways against him, my breath on his ear, my teeth biting down gently on the silky lobe.

“Tell me again.” He shivered as I kissed behind his ear and then sucked the delicate skin.

“I missed you,” I told him, pressing my lips to the side of his neck. “So very much.”

He made a noise in the back of his throat that made his sister turn around and look at me.

“Hi.” I smiled at her.

She shook her head. “You two are so damn cute.”

I waggled my eyebrows at her, and she blushed a beautiful shade of red.

“Me,” Joe demanded, pressing my hand down onto his thigh. “Concentrate on me.”

“Jesus, Marcus.” She sighed heavily. “I had no idea my brother was such a diva.”

“No?” I chuckled. “Really?”

Joe growled, and we both laughed.

At the restaurant, I got out first, helped Joe down, and then passed him his cane before I took his hand.

“Oh.”

I looked at Ellen and saw how tense she looked. “What?”

“You’re holding his hand.”

“Yes, I am.” I flashed her what my assistant Lolita Powell called my lion grin: all teeth, heat, and power.

“It’s fuckin’ freezing out here,” Joe groused at us, tugging on my hand. “Let’s get inside.”

“Joseph!” Deb scolded her son.

“It’s okay, baby,” I soothed him, lengthening my stride and slowing him down at the same time. “Don’t get upset.”

“First you’re black, now you’re gay,” he grumbled as he walked. “Fuck this, Marcus. Why are we even here?”

“Because you love your grandfather and that’s what families do: deal with sometimes-uncomfortable situations together.”

“I can deal with anything when it’s me, but not when it’s you.”

And I knew that. Joe had the patience of a saint in all areas that did not pertain to me. He was a little protective.

“Ellen didn’t mean anything. She was just making an observation. You gotta stop being so sensitive, okay?”

He only grunted, making no promises.

“Joey!”

I stopped as a man came jogging toward us. He was tall with golden-brown hair and striking blue-gray eyes and fine, chiseled features.

“Ohmygod, Kurt, is that you?” Barbara squealed, her mouth dropping open in surprise.

“Barbie.” His smile for her was huge and when she flung herself at him, he caught her easily.

I stood there and waited as Kurt hugged everyone before he turned to Joe.

“Joey,” he sighed, and there was a lot of affection in the single word.

“Hey,” Joe said coolly, tightening his grip on my hand.

There would be no hugging.

“It’s good to see you,” Kurt said, moving forward, arms out, closing in.

Joe knew my body as well as his own, he knew how tall I stood, how much space I took up and how far he had to move around me to put distance between him and other people. He didn't have to guess. He also knew that if he was retreating, no one would get by me.

“Mom!” he called out to Deb, taking one step back and sideways, hands fisting in my suit jacket. “Do they serve Hot Browns at this restaurant? I want Marcus to try one.”

“Of course,” she called back, but I didn't see her; my entire focus was on Kurt as he stopped his forward momentum before he plowed into me.

It was perfectly clear to me that Joe did not want to hug him, but because Joe was Joe, he had given the appearance that because he was blind he had simply missed the motion. It was extraordinarily thoughtful but clear at the same time. And it was strange.

It wasn't like him. Joe hugged and kissed everybody. He even hugged my fellow warden Jackson's new boyfriend, Raphael, and Raphael wasn't even human. Something was really wrong.

“Joe,” Kurt chuckled, “you accidentally hid behind your bodyguard buddy.”

“Kurt,” he said quickly, clutching at me, “this is my boyfriend, Marcus Roth. Marcus, this is my cousin Kurt that I told you about.”

Cousin.

That he told me about.

That he... told... me.... I felt my stomach twist and my eyes narrowed.

“It's a pleasure to meet you, Marcus,” he said, offering me his hand.

If I took his hand, I would crush it. My eyes locked on his as I clenched my jaw tight.

He withdrew his hand, grabbed Barbara's, and told us that his mother had reserved a big table in the back of the restaurant. Ellen followed after her

two cousins, and Elliot and Deb turned to face me and Joe.

“What was that about?” Joe’s father asked.

“Nothing. Let’s just go in,” Joe assured them, tugging on my hand.

Elliot put a hand gently on his son’s shoulder. “Please, Joe.”

He let out a quick breath. “It’s no big deal. I’m just being oversensitive because I’m tired since I don’t sleep well in a strange place.”

At home, even though he didn’t like to, Joe slept fine without me. He could wake up in the night, know exactly where he was, where everything was, and what had not moved. In a new place alone, if a noise woke him, he had no one to shake awake and ask what the noise was. He slept lightly when he wasn’t home. At home, the man slept like the dead.

“Honey?” Deb prodded him.

His exhale of air was sharp, exasperated. “It was just a prank, but when I was fourteen we came here, out to Uncle Glenn’s farm in Irvine, and I went swimming with him that time. Remember?”

“Do I remember,” Deb snapped at him. “Yes, Joseph, I think I remember you getting lost and staying out all night and taking ten years off my life. It rings a bell.”

“Well, the reason I was out there at all was because Kurt said that he was going to show me this great spot where we could swim that wasn’t deep, that I would love.”

“Kurt said you wandered off.”

“He lied because he lost me, Mom.”

“Are you kidding?”

“No, but who cares. It was like a million years ago, right?”

“I’m gonna kill him,” she said, whirling toward the front door.

“Dad,” Joe said fast.

Elliot caught his wife, who promptly fell apart in his arms. And even though, as Joe said, it had been a million years ago, for his mother the scare was still very real and well remembered. And he had only told her a very small piece of it.

Kurt had told Joe that he had a friend who thought Joe was cute. He had then lured my boyfriend down to a creek and introduced him to this friend. What Joe did not know was that there was not just the three of them. There had been six, counting Joe and Kurt. Joe was young and trusting and horny at fourteen and so had dropped his pants because the other boy was going to as well. And he had gone to his knees, but once he heard another voice tell him he was pretty, he got scared. He didn’t know who was there, and when someone tried to shove a cock in his mouth, he tried to get up, only to have his shoulders held. The laughter unglued him, and when he fought to be released, they all took turns hitting him, calling him a faggot, before pushing him into the water.

At that point Kurt’s brain had apparently kicked in, but the water was higher than it should have been that time of year because of the rain, and there was just enough current to suck Joe under and pull him into a connecting stream that was swollen from a rise in the river. He lost his pants as he tumbled around and swallowed enough water to drown him. But he made it to the bank, and there he stayed all night, freezing, with only a T-shirt to keep himself warm. They found him the following morning, bruised, scratched up, with a mild case of hypothermia. He had never offered a good explanation as to why his clothes were off, but everyone had figured the poor kid was out of his head at the time. The bruises were credited to his ordeal, and while Kurt had been in trouble for not looking out better for his cousin, nothing more had come of it.

“I’m gonna drop him in a well and see how he likes being cold and wet all night long,” I promised, my voice low.

“No, you’re not.” Joe smiled and turned toward me, sliding his arm under my suit jacket and curling it around my waist, his head notched under my chin. “You’re gonna leave him alone. But make sure he doesn’t come near me so I don’t have to make a scene and tell him off.”

As always, Joe worried about making other people uncomfortable.

I clutched him to me, because just thinking about the fact that the dear, sweet man I held in my arms could have died at fourteen, and therefore never been at the club the night I met him, and not have been able to love me dearly and desperately for the last six years hurt my heart.

What if there were no Joseph Locke for me to love? I could not imagine me without him; it just wasn’t possible anymore. He was my home, my whole life. Without him, nothing worked. I could be me out in the world, both professionally and as a warder, because I had a sanctuary to return to.

“Baby?”

I shivered hard.

“I can’t breathe,” he laughed against my throat, his warm breath tickling over my skin.

“Okay,” Elliot said as I let Joe go. He pulled his wife around in front of me, and Joe’s mother grabbed him, crushing him again.

“Christ,” he muttered. “Mother, come on.”

But she needed to remind herself that it was in the past and that she had her son safely in her arms before we could go in. Mothers were like that. Because Joe was the same way, he hugged her back tight and whispered into her hair. Everything was okay.

Inside, the hostess led us to a large room in the back of the restaurant where two long tables were set up side by side. Each table sat twenty-five, and that was enough for just the family. For the party on Saturday, they were

expecting a good three hundred people, but for the rest of the time, fifty was the high end.

“Are you the only non-white guy in the room?” Joe asked me.

“Yes.”

“Am I the only blind guy?”

“Yes again,” I said, squeezing his hand.

“And are we the only gay people here?”

“For the third time, and the win,” I teased him, scanning the crowd. “I’m gonna go with yes.”

“Oh thank God, I wanted us to be special.”

“No worries about that, love,” I assured him.

“Awww, thank you, honey. I—hey, wait a minute… that’s not a compliment.”

I tugged him after me, and we went to speak to his grandfather.

You could tell that when he was younger Henry Locke had broken hearts. The man was still stunning at eighty with his thick white hair, ruddy complexion, broad shoulders, and strong build. I was certain that women had swooned when he walked down the street at twenty-five.

“Marcus!” He greeted me loudly, standing up, big grin on his face, arms open to receive me. “So glad you could make it.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it,” I said as I stepped into him.

He hugged me tight, pounded my back with his fist, and let me go before turning to his grandson. Unfortunately, he was careful with Joe—which my boyfriend hated— always treating him like he was fragile. Henry liked me better, and we all knew it, because I could do all the things he could, but

mostly I had won him over when we took turns target shooting two Christmases ago. I had stood outside for hours with him, never tiring, never complaining, and we had bonded. Now whenever I visited, I was received warmly.

After he spoke to Joe for a few minutes, we walked down the table to where Barbara had saved us two spots. Unfortunately, Kurt was sitting beside her. When my eyes flicked to his, he looked away, so I figured we were all on the same page.

People kept stopping to see Joe, put their hands on his shoulders. The women leaned down to kiss him, and the men patted him affectionately. Everyone shook hands with me. The women hugged me when I stood, and the men clasped my hand as well, making me feel welcome.

“So,” one of Joe’s cousins asked from the other side of me. “What do you do now, Joey?”

He cleared his throat, hand on my thigh under the table. “I own my own company. It’s called Bumpy Road Limited, and we make plastic pieces that are in Braille that go over laptop keyboards and phones and watches and other things.”

“What do you mean?”

He pulled out his phone and everyone saw the clear plastic piece over the top that had Braille bumps on it.

“That’s so cool,” another cousin told him.

“Well, we have a lot of orders for them, and we’re adding new designs as new pieces of hardware—phones and stuff—come on the market every day. They work just like a gel skin, maybe a little heavier, so they can be peeled off and put on, and they’re durable, so they last a long time.”

“How do you manage all that?” Ellen asked.

“I do most of the on-site selling, and I have four outside sales people and then clerks and an office manager and of course an accountant and a lawyer and—”

“Isn’t Marcus your lawyer?”

“Marcus is a criminal lawyer,” he told her. “He doesn’t do boring contract work; he saves people’s lives.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Stop that,” Joe snapped at me. “Your work is very important.”

Ellen was startled—it was all over her face.

I winked at her, and she was thoroughly flustered. “Everything I do, the man knows.”

She nodded fast, touched by that for some reason.

The waitress showed up, and I thanked her for being a goddess for bringing me coffee. I was quiet after that, letting Joe order my food, sitting there, taking in the conversations around me, listening.

I realized how tired I was—exhausted really—and my body was starting to sink into the chair. But I smiled and leaned my knee against Joe’s and talked to his father about my caseload. When the food was delivered to the table by several waitresses at once, I registered how hungry I really was.

“Marcus.” Joe said my name to draw my attention.

“Oh, you have magic eggs. I got bacon and nifty toast.” I yawned as I rubbed my eyes. They were watering, I was so tired.

“Okay.” Joe smiled. “And coffee?”

“Coffee’s good.” I yawned louder. “God, I gotta go to bed.”

“When?” he teased me.

I snorted out a laugh. The man had a one-track mind.

“Joe,” his mother began, “honey, your eggs are at—”

“Oh no, Mom, it’s okay,” he cut her off. “Marcus already said.”

“I’m sorry?”

“He already told me where everything is on my plate.”

“When?” She was surprised.

I turned and looked at her. “He hates the clock thing. Has he never told you that?”

She was looking at me with a bemused expression on her face. “No, dear, he never has.”

Of course he hadn’t. Joe only ever told *me* the truth about everything. All the other nice people in his life, he shielded and protected and let them do whatever the hell they wanted to make them think that they were helping him. It was thoughtful and wildly distrustful at the same time. With everyone but me, Joe worried about being a burden. And his family was wonderful, but still he was careful with them, never wanting to cause a stir or rock the boat. His relationship with me was the only one that was different.

“Well, Deb, he hates it.” I smiled at her.

“Oh. And so what did you—”

Joe’s laughter was deep and husky, one of the many things I loved about the man. “Mom,” he coughed, still chuckling, “it’s *Schoolhouse Rock.*”

“I’m sorry?”

“The numbers are—”

“Oh!” His cousin Ellen smiled wide. “That’s right. Three is a Magic Number and—”

“Nifty eggs.” Barbara nodded. “That’s right... naughty, nasty, nifty, number nine,” she sang softly.

When she stopped, all eyes were on her.

“What?”

Ellen giggled. “That was quite the show of dorkiness there, Barbie.”

“Yeah, I know, but—I got?” She looked at me, confused.

I grinned at her. “You know, I got six, he got six, she got—”

“Six.” She drew out the word as she smiled wide. “Yeah okay.”

Deborah Locke was beaming at me. “I love that.”

“I like it too,” Joe told her. “And Marcus usually does it fast just like he did a minute ago when we’re out places, so it’s not a thing, ya know?” he said, reaching for his coffee.

“Eleven?” She asked me.

“Good-good-good-good, good eleven, never gave me any trouble ’til after nine,” Ellen sang for her, off-key.

I laughed at her. “Must you sing?”

Everyone close to us lost it.

“Oh.” Deb caught her breath, her eyes filling fast. “I just—”

“Mother,” Joe cautioned her.

She cleared her throat. “Okay—okay, sorry.”

I chuckled, leaned sideways, and kissed her cheek. She turned to look into my eyes, her hands lifting to frame my face.

I smiled at her. “You can cry whenever you like.”

She nodded, leaning in close to kiss my cheek before letting me go.

“Mother, you’re not kissing my boyfriend, are you?” Joe grumbled. “You have no idea where he’s been.”

“Quiet,” his father scolded him. “Your mother can kiss him if she wants.”

The looks I got after that, from everyone except Kurt, let me know I was golden.

EATING when you’re tired is never a good idea. The last of your energy gets sucked away to help digest food, and then you’re really screwed. I fell asleep in the van.

Joe’s parents’ house in Nicholasville was a beautiful two-story Georgian Colonial in red brick. During the holidays there was a wreath in every window with an electric candle in the center. As it was early December, Elliot had not gotten around to decorating yet, but I was sure it would be on the agenda soon.

As I trudged up the stairs, everyone else assembled in the living room, I considered taking Deb up on her offer for me to take a nap. She and Barb were going back out to run what sounded like a million errands before the dancing at the country club later that evening. It sounded so good, the nap, but I just splashed water on my face instead. Then I felt better, more alive, less like a zombie. As I was getting ready to go back down and join the others, the door to the bedroom opened and Joe came in.

“Hey you,” I sighed.

“I know this is short notice,” he told me. “But my Dad is running over to his shop because he got a call to meet someone, so could we... go with him?”

I saw the grimace, knew he would have much rather we climbed into bed together, but he was worried and I couldn’t have that.

“Course. Let’s go.”

The relief on his face was a joy to see.

III

I HAD gotten myself pumped up for some kind of altercation during the half-hour ride from Nicholasville to downtown Lexington, but by the time we got there, whoever had been there was gone, leaving Joe's dad looking at me as he had during the entire trip.

"It was nothing, like I said. You guys didn't need to come with me," Elliot said.

I studied his face.

"I have no idea what Joey thought he heard the other day, but if there was cause for any concern, you know I would tell you."

"Why didn't you want Joe to tell me what was going on? You told him you didn't want me calling the police."

"I didn't want him to give you the wrong idea, because I know you're an officer of the court and so it's your duty to inform the authorities if you think something is amiss. But they were just some punk kids, Marcus. If I couldn't take care of it, I would have asked you."

I nodded, not believing a word of the rambling explanation.

"You could be sleeping." He smiled at me. "You guys really didn't have to come with me."

"No, I know," I covered, chuckling. "But I enjoy walking around down here, and this way you'll take me for a beer before we head back, right?"

"Absolutely." His smile grew wider. "Why don't you and Joe spend some time, just the two of you? I'll answer some e-mail and check on the orders, and then I'll meet you over at Dunbar's in a couple of hours."

I agreed, and Joe and I headed out.

“Shit,” he said, stopping suddenly on the sidewalk.

“What?”

“I forgot my scarf back there.” He made a noise of disgust. “Walk me back, ’kay?”

“Course.” I smiled at how red the cold made his nose.

“Stop it,” he grumbled. “I can hear you smiling, and I’m not cute.”

“You can’t hear me smiling.” I sighed as my grin got bigger. “And you’re adorable.”

“I am not.”

But he *so* was. There were freckles across the bridge of the man’s small button nose; his lashes were so long and curly and thick that when his hair fell forward, it caught in them, and his smile was mischievous and sheepish at the same time. He was devastating.

“I’m sorry I dragged us out here for nothing,” he sighed, his head tipped back as he breathed me in. “God, you smell good.”

“Oh yeah,” I rumbled. I touched his face, loving the feel of his skin under mine, the wicked gleam in his eyes, the sly curl of his beautiful lips.

“Let’s go get a hotel room for an hour.”

“That’s classy,” I teased, bending to kiss him because I couldn’t help it.

He tasted like the spearmint lip balm he always used and the hot chocolate he’d had at the restaurant, and the flavors together when I sampled them made me a little crazy.

His moan was deep and sexy. His lips parted and his tongue darted out to meet and claim mine. I grabbed him and turned, pulled him into a dark alley between buildings, and shoved him up against a wall, pinning him there. Normally my control wrapped around me, made me the cool guy, the

rational guy, the guy who never gave himself over to impetuous action. But I had no buffer where Joe was concerned; he alone could pull down all my walls.

“Oh,” he moaned, his breath catching, stuttering, before his hands fisted in my sweater and held on.

He just fit me like no one ever had. My mouth on his, my thigh nestled against his groin, one hand buried in the thick, wavy auburn hair, the other kneading his ass as he pressed forward—all of it a dance we had perfected years ago. He always wanted to be closer. I couldn’t wait to have him there; being entwined was always best.

The first kiss quickly became the second and the third with nothing but a panting breath to mark one from the next. His submissive whimper, so sweet, so heartfelt, infused with wanton need, made my balls ache. Every time, *all* the time, my lust for the man was like brushfire, consuming me, leveling me.

He started to rub his bulging erection into my thigh, the contact making him shudder, and I was helpless to stop him, wanting instead to make him come apart faster.

My fingers worked his belt loose, undid buttons, slid his zipper open just enough to get a hand down the back of his dress pants, slide over elastic and underneath. I had wet them, shoved them inside with our dueling tongues to make sure they were coated with saliva before I began my campaign.

I lifted his hard, leaking cock from his briefs and gripped tight as I pressed slippery fingers slowly inside him from the back.

“Marcus!” He gasped my name, whispering it fiercely as I stroked him and curved my fingers forward, pushing deeper, looking for the spot that would make him howl.

“You’re so hot, so beautiful. Show me baby. Come for me. Come in my hand.”

His breathing changed to panting, and when my fingers pegged his gland, my name came out as a cry.

“I have you. You’re safe in my arms, Joey. You know you’re safe.”

“Yes.” His eyes fluttered with the sensations rolling through him.

He rocked forward, pushing in and out of my grip, the friction, the pressure too exquisite a temptation. His hands were like claws on my sweater as he held on. His head tipped back, his eyes closed tight and mouth open. The orgasm built until I bent and kissed him, taking the roar into my mouth as his body went rigid with his release. He came hard, spurting into my fist, semen oozing through my fingers as he shuddered in my arms.

The man trusted me implicitly, and that was all over his face. He knew wherever we were, no one else could see, because he knew that I wouldn’t share the sight of him. I would not allow anyone else to ever see my love’s surrender.

I watched him finish, buck forward into my hand, press back on my long fingers, and the ache that had welled up inside me blossomed and became hunger.

“Don’t you want me?” he asked, his breath stilted.

“Always.”

“Then?”

“I can wait,” I breathed.

“I could have too.”

“But I had to put my hands on you,” I growled, leaning forward and kissing down the length of his throat.

His low whimper was very sexy. “You could have put me up against a wall.”

“This was better.”

“You didn’t even get off.”

“But I got to watch you lose yourself with what I was doing to you, and we both know I’m the only one that you trust enough to abandon every inhibition you have.”

“Yes.”

“Kiss me,” I ordered.

The way he lifted for me, parting his lips, licking them.... His desire to submit was intoxicating. I ground my mouth down over his and laid claim. I devoured him.

I kissed him until he shoved me off, breathless, his lips red and swollen, and as I nibbled down the side of his throat, licked and sucked, he began to writhe in my arms. In seconds the movement, the pressure, the friction would be too much. I stepped away fast, leaving him gripping the wall behind him, and I wiped my hands on my pants.

I stared at him, certain that I really would have him there in the alley if we didn’t stop.

“Marcus,” he said between breaths.

“Sorry.” I managed to get out. “We need to just—”

“Is there a mark on me?” he asked, twisting his head so the cords in his neck bulged.

I shook my head, trying to get my racing heart to calm down and my cock to stop throbbing. Anywhere else, with anyone else, never, ever, would there be a problem. Only Joe released this wave of lust that I couldn’t contain.

“Use your words, Marcus.”

Shit. “No.” I cleared my throat, shivering. “There’s no mark.”

His eyes became narrow slits of heat. “Then make one.”

I almost swallowed my tongue.

“Please,” he whispered.

The idea of shoving the man deep into the alley and bending him over and fucking him hard and fast had me choking on my own desire.

“Let’s go get your scarf,” I rasped.

“Fuck the scarf.”

“Let’s just go get it and then find a hotel like you said,” I grumbled, pushing back against the wall, counting in my head, willing my body to calm to be cool, normal and thoughtful Marcus Roth.

“Look at me.”

I was. He looked debauched, pants down around his ankles—underwear as well—and hooded eyes, standing there with his flaccid cock still leaking at the tip. He should not have been in control of any part of the conversation. But he was so self-possessed that even though he was the one who had been ravished, it didn’t matter.

“When you fuck me back at home, I want you to leave marks, you understand?”

“Yes.”

His face brightened. “Good.”

I growled at him and he beamed back at me. He loved to win.

When I walked back into Joe’s father’s hardware store five minutes later, I left Joe outside to wait for me. The jingle of bells again announced my arrival, and I was surprised that the two guys I had seen leave when we

arrived earlier were back. What was even more interesting was that one of them was behind the counter with Elliot.

“Marcus.” Elliot smiled at me. “What brings you back, son?”

“Joe forgot his scarf.” I squinted at him.

“Oh.” Elliot forced a smile, looking around. “Isn’t that it right there?”

He pointed and I saw it, the primary-color knitted beacon of a scarf one of his employees had made him. When I picked it up, I looked back at Elliot and saw again how uncomfortable he looked.

“Who are your friends?” I asked.

He opened his mouth to speak, but apparently the guy on my side of the counter had had enough of my presence and the interruption.

“Why don’t you get out of here before I put you out. We have things to discuss with Mr. Locke here.”

I nodded as I moved forward. “Oh yeah? Like what?”

“Marcus,” Elliot interrupted, tipping his head toward the door. “Go on and catch up with Joe, son. This doesn’t concern you.”

“Oh, but it really does,” I said, moving forward until I was beside the counter and turning my head to the guy beside me. “What’s your name?”

“Why the fuck you wanna know?”

I arched an eyebrow at him.

“Arcan.”

My head turned to the guy beside Elliot.

He scoffed at me. “Emir.”

One name. Both of them only had single names. Interesting. I returned my gaze to Arcan. “Okay, tell Emir to come out here and talk to me. Him being back there with my father-in-law is making me nervous.”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“I asked nicely,” I told him, moving fast—faster than either Arcan or Emir could track—and cleared the counter to stand in front of Emir in seconds. I was in his space, nose to nose, so he had no choice but to take a step back. “I really did.”

“You have no idea who you’re messing with,” Arcan barked.

“Marcus, please just go,” Elliot pleaded.

“Whoever you’re collecting protection money for,” I told them, “Mr. Locke is done paying.”

“Marcus,” Elliot’s voice cracked. “You have to go or they’ll hurt—”

“They won’t hurt anyone,” I promised him.

“Oh yeah we will,” Emir assured me, and I saw his eyes suddenly change from the ugly dishwater blue they were to an even uglier blood red.

“No!” Elliot yelled. “Please don’t hurt him.”

I felt Joe’s father pleading for my life all the way down to my soul. The man really did love me.

“Too late,” the second guy said as his eyes changed too and he reached for me.

I took a breath, held it for one heartbeat, two, and then released a pulse of power that froze both men in their tracks.

“That’s bullshit,” the first guy said.

It was not exactly the response I was expecting, but they stopped moving nonetheless.

“Breka paid fuckin’ Tarin this month; you ain’t supposed to be here.”

Tarin? “I don’t know him.”

“How?” Now Arcan was confused.

“I’m visiting,” I told him. “And I’m not alone, and I can assure you that when my sentinel finds out what’s going on here, the council will be notified.”

They both went even paler than they were to begin with.

I wanted them out because I had calls to make, because I knew I needed backup. “Go now.”

“Or?” Emir asked.

“Or I can make you.”

I was not the scary warder. My friend Malic, with his growl of a voice, bulging muscles, and arctic blue eyes—he was spooky. Even though I was big, I normally came off as benign. But the two demons tripped over themselves getting out of the hardware store.

When the door slammed behind them, the bells having never been so loud, I turned to look at Joe’s father.

“How do you not tell me that you had demon trouble, Elliot?”

His eyes, that wondrous cerulean blue he shared with his son, were huge.

“You need to tell me what’s going on.”

The man was speechless, just staring at me.

“I can help, but you have to tell me everything.”

“Marcus.” He finally breathed out my name, grabbing hold of my arms.
“What are you?”

“He’s a warder, Dad,” Joe said, and when I turned my head, I realized that he was there along with his mother and sister. The bells had been loud, and it made sense that Elliot’s family had been coming in while the two demons were running out. I just hadn’t noticed. “And I’m thinking you need one.”

“What are you two doing here?” I asked Joe’s mother and Barbara, scared for them, startled because I had not prepared for them. I had been ready to protect Joe—I always was—and his father at that pivotal moment, but I had not anticipated the women, and it made me nervous that I had not.

“I forgot to get the zip ties to hold up the banner, and I thought we’d stop and grab them, and... what in the world is going on?” Deb yelled.

“They ran from you.” Elliot said, all his focus locked in on me, holding me so tight.

“Which was smart on their part,” I told him. “Because I would have sent them both back to the pit if I’d had my swords.”

“You didn’t bring your swords?”

I looked over at Joe because I heard the alarm, the indignation. Joe didn’t get upset and reel with pain or worry, he yelled. And he was mad.

“Why the hell would you leave your swords at home?”

“Think about what you’re saying,” I reminded my boyfriend.

“No, Marcus!” he shouted. “You should have brought them! You should always bring them! Being a warder is twenty-four-hour, seven-day-a-week job, and we both know it!”

Shit.

“You know I’m right.”

He was right.

“Say it, because I can’t see the look of resignation on your face!”

I crossed the room and grabbed him instead. His arms wrapped around my waist as he pressed his body against mine.

“Please,” he spoke into my throat, his breath warm and his mouth on my skin causing a shiver of anticipation anyone could see. “Baby, you have to be more careful. I can’t lose you, okay?”

I nodded. He clutched me tighter.

And we stood like that with my cheek resting on the top of his head, one hand in his hair, the other around his back and both his arms wrapped tight around me. He always liked listening to the steady beat of my heart.

“Marcus Adam Roth!”

I started and looked across the room at Deb.

“Oh, you’re in trouble,” Joseph chuckled, lifting his chin. “Gimme a kiss before you die.”

I growled at him, kissed him, and then turned my head to his mother.

“How dare you keep a secret like this from us, from your family!”

“I—”

“And you!” she roared at her husband. “How dare you not trust me with this?”

“I thought you’d think I was nuts talking about demons and such.”

“We have been married for forty-five years, Elliot Locke. There is nothing that would come out of your mouth that I wouldn’t believe!”

He stared at her because he had no excuse to give her.

“All of you,” she said fast, “need to go get in the car so we can go home and have us a talk.”

Joe groaned.

I pressed his face into my chest before his mother killed him. “His stomach hurts,” I told her.

She leveled me with her look. “Marcus Roth, I’m about ready to skin you alive.”

But the thing was, she was mad, really mad, and I loved it. There was no talk of how scared she was and how I was putting her son in danger or how I should get out. She was just mad that I hadn’t confided in her.

I moved fast, crossed the floor, and grabbed her, hugging her tight.

“Marcus,” she whimpered against me, her arms around me, and her hands digging into my back.

“I thought you would hate me or not want me near Joe, and I’m so sorry, but I love you all so much and the thought of losing you, any of you, just ___”

“Marcus, don’t be stupid. We’re your family. Families don’t turn their back on their own.”

I clutched her tighter and put my head down in her shoulder.

Seconds later she pushed free. “But you, Elliot Locke!”

“Yeah, you’re toast,” Joe laughed at his father.

“Joseph Locke!”

And it was a free-for-all after that as Barbara started yelling too. It was nice to be part of a family that cared.

IN THE van it was quiet, so I took that opportunity to call Jael.

“Marot,” he said, and I realized he sounded annoyed.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he grumbled.

But something was and I could guess. “Your warders and Deidre’s not hitting it off?”

There was a long silence.

“What leads you to that?”

I grunted. “Ryan and Collin, right?”

“How did you know?”

“I know.”

“And?”

“And it’s simple. Collin’s taken an interest in Julian, and Ryan and Julian are like a minute old as a couple. Ryan’s jealous, that’s all.”

“Ryan Dean used to be a model. Why in the world would he—”

“Have you ever known Ryan to be logical?”

“No, that’s Leith’s job.”

“There you go.”

“Well, Marot, let me go put my house in order and I’ll call you—Wait, you called me. What’s wrong?”

Marot. It was my warder name.

Some of us had special names, some of us didn't. The more public a figure you were, the more likely you would get a call sign to protect your identity, and while I understood, it was also confusing at times.

“I have demon trouble.”

“Pardon me?”

“And maybe warder trouble as well.”

“Start at the beginning.”

I explained, and he listened and grunted. I heard him cover the phone to talk to someone, and when he came back he told me that he was having Deidre make some calls as we spoke. It was nice to have two sentinels as backup.

“What should I do?”

“For starters, I'll send someone to you immediately. It sounds as though you've disrupted the flow of things around there, and I don't know if Tarin is a demon or a warder, but there's a warder in there somewhere, and he's either doing this himself or the corruption stems from his sentinel.”

“How likely is that?”

“Not very, but we still have to act on the assumption that this is the case.”

“Okay.”

“Let me do this. Let me contact the council now and see what I can find out about the sentinel, and I'll call you back in a few minutes. Meanwhile I'll send Leith to stay with you.”

I would have preferred my best friend. “I think I'll just call Malic to—”

“No.”

But he'd said it too fast. "What's wrong?"

He didn't answer.

"Jael?"

He cleared his throat. "Malic and Jackson are on another plane with Raphael. He found Moira. She was the demon lord Saudrian's mate, you remember."

I remembered that Saudrian had tried to turn Leith into his champion and that Raphael had killed him. And I knew that Moira had vowed to kill Raphael, who was my fellow warder Jackson's hearth, for being the one to take her mate's life.

"Why would you let Raphael get anywhere near her?"

"As you know, Raphael is a demonic bounty hunter, and apparently one of his contacts let him know where Moira was. Since Jackson was not going to let him go alone, he went with him. But Malic wasn't letting Jackson follow without backup, so he went to keep both of the others safe."

It was just like Malic to go. He would never say he cared; he would just show it instead. I felt a pang of guilt for being away.

"Ryan and I are here to guard the city, so Leith can come assist you."

"I should be at home."

"You should be with your hearth, and especially now as it sounds like both he and his family—your family—are in danger. Let me know if you need Ryan to come as well."

"I won't."

"I'll send Leith to you shortly."

"Thank you. Ask him to bring my swords. Please keep me apprised of the other situation."

“Of course.”

“You say that like you would have told me if I hadn’t called.”

“Malic made me promise not to. He wanted you to enjoy your time with Joe.”

Which again was just like him. Malic never came out and said that my happiness, or that of my hearth’s, meant anything to him. But he showed it.

“Please keep me in the loop.”

“I will.”

I hung up and let my head fall back.

“Are you all right?”

Turning to look at Joe, I exhaled deeply. “There’s trouble at home.”

“Like what kind?”

“Like I should be there.”

Joe took a breath and squeezed my knee. “Let’s just deal with this problem with my dad, and then we’ll fly home.”

I shook my head. “No, Joe, that’s not what I—”

“Marcus.” He cut me off, taking my hand. “Everyone will understand a work emergency, and why would I stay here if you couldn’t come back? I need to be with you, especially if you’re going to be putting yourself in danger. A warder has to be able to return to his hearth and home to be cared for and find sanctuary and draw power. I understand my role, and it’s as vital to me as it is to you. I love you and I know my value. But I can’t leave my family in danger, and I know you can’t, either. So let’s handle this and then go home so you can fight alongside your brothers.”

He was decisive and firm and absolute. It was hard to contain my love for him, because really, the man was phenomenal.

“Just say, ‘Yes, Joe, I agree.’”

“Yes, Joe, I agree,” I sighed.

“I go with you, Marcus. Don’t be stupid.”

Of course he did.

IV

WE WERE all sitting in the living room when the doorbell rang. Barbara went to get it, and when she came back less than a minute later, she had a strange expression on her face. The reason was obvious a second later; Leith Haas was trailing after her and she was a bit overwhelmed.

I understood why.

He was shorter than me—most men were—but not small. At six-two, long and lean-muscled, the man was not someone you looked at and thought *delicate* or *fragile*.

“Hey,” I greeted, rising from the couch.

He didn’t hold out his hand or try to hug me. He simply passed me a scabbard with dual sheaths, and I took it, feeling instantly calmer now that I could defend myself and everyone I loved.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He smiled as he moved beside me to bend over and hug Joe.

Everyone saw him do it, and their faces all broke into similar smiles.

“This is Leith Haas,” I explained to the room, “and he’s a warder just like me. Leith, this is Joe’s family: his father, Elliot, his mother, Deb, and his sister, Barb.”

Leith smiled, and I watched Barbara, especially, react to the dark aqua blue eyes, the way he curled a long piece of hair behind his ear and the play of muscles under his clothes. There was no missing the man’s beauty, but what I had always admired more was his gentleness, the quiet and calmness that he spread, and how thoughtful he was. Leith tended to think before acting, and I appreciated that quality about him.

“How’s Simon?” Joe asked after the man’s hearth.

The shy smile got big and out of control. “He’s good, Joe. Thank you.”

“Oh.” Barb sucked in a breath.

I watched her eyes roam over Leith, from the long dirty-blond curls that fell to the middle of his back to the broad shoulders and muscular legs. Between the golden tan and his hair pulled back into a queue, you thought “surfer” not “warder,” but unlike her, I knew the man was deadly. When the doorbell rang, he excused himself to answer it.

“Your friend is gorgeous,” Barbara breathed.

“He’s got a really hot boyfriend too,” Joe told his sister.

“How do you know?” I growled.

“Don’t be jealous, baby,” Joe teased, patting his lap.

He had no idea how badly I wanted to lie down so he could pet me.

“Marcus, Leith is gay?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I told Barb before my eyes flicked back to Joe.

“Simon has a voice almost as sexy as yours, Marcus Roth,” my boyfriend teased again.

I really wanted to be alone with my man. I was almost thrumming with need.

“Marot,” Leith called to me, and when I looked up—because he’d used my warder name, names we never called one another—I found myself looking at two men.

I turned and stepped in close to Joe.

“This is—”

“Shane Harris?” Deb said, looking at the man on the left.

“Mrs. Locke,” the man said, his eyes passing over her as he looked for —“Joe!” he cried.

“Shane?” Joe lifted his face.

“Ohmygod,” Shane gasped, crossing the room preternaturally fast, going down on one knee so he was at eye level with Joe. “Holy shit.”

Joe reached up and put his hands on the other man’s face. When he did, he smiled. “Shit, Shane, how long’s it been?”

Apparently Shane Harris was more than content to stare into my boyfriend’s eyes for the rest of his life.

“Joe,” he finally breathed, his thumbs grazing over his cheeks.

“Marcus,” Leith said under his breath dangerously.

I turned and found my friend with narrowed eyes, a clenched jaw, and his hand on the pommel of his sword. He very much wanted to separate Shane Harris’s head from his body. This was my hearth Shane Harris was touching, and that made my friend nervous. And not just for me, more for himself. Warders losing their hearths, for any reason, was cause for panic. To lose your hearth to another, as our fellow warder, Jackson, had, was close to unbearable. But I had more faith than that.

My relationship with Joe was the longest that existed in my clutch—my group of five warders. Ryan and his hearth Julian had not yet made six months, Malic and his hearth Dylan were even newer, Leith and Simon had just hit seven months, and Jackson and Raphael were verging on three. So they all reacted to the very idea of losing their hearths as cause for deliberate, violent action. Joe and I, the old married couple at just shy of six years, were the anomaly, and so instead of reacting, Leith looked to me to guide him. I had to let him see what faith and trust looked like.

“What are you doing here?” Shane asked, absorbing Joe’s face with his eyes, tracing over it with his hands, utterly, completely, entranced.

“I’m here for my grandfather’s eightieth,” he replied, smiling as he leaned back, away from Shane’s touch, done now with the reunion. He tipped his head back, up at me, reaching at the same time. “And my partner Marcus Roth came with me.”

I took hold of the questing hand, squeezing lightly, smiling over Joe’s happy sigh.

Beside me, Leith exhaled as Shane Harris finally looked at me.

“You’re a warder?” he asked as he stood up, his tone, his stance both combative.

“I am.”

“Joe”—he cleared his throat—“is your hearth?”

“For six years now.” I added the five months in that it would take us to reach the milestone without thought.

He was visibly stricken, and no one said a word.

“I never told him what I was.”

Which was his mistake and not mine. I had trusted Joseph Locke after the first night I had him in my bed. What was Shane Harris’s excuse?

“So what the hell is going on here?” Leith asked, uncharacteristically brash for him. Normally, he only raised his voice around people he knew well, but I was guessing that Joe being thrown into the mix—or the question of a hearth—was what was rattling him.

“Hello,” the other man who had come in with Shane said.

I turned to look at him and found myself smiling. He reminded me right away of my friend, Jackson Tybalt, a fellow warder. There was similar

brown hair that spilled to his shoulders, familiar brown eyes though Jackson's were darker, and the smile, warm and inviting, was also like my friend's.

"I'm Kyle," he said, moving forward, offering his hand to me. "Kyle Riggs, and it seems that all of us are long on tempers and short on manners since none of us introduced ourselves proper."

He was right. We had gone directly to anger and assigning blame.

"Like I said." He smiled as he squeezed my hand. "I'm Kyle. Who're you?"

I told him my name and introduced Leith, and then Shane also presented himself properly. Once all the handshaking was done and we had all calmed down a little, Leith asked Shane and Kyle what they were doing there.

"We're here on behalf of our sentinel, William Boyd, to find out what happened today at Mr. Locke's store," Kyle told him. "He got a call from the council on a concern from your sentinel, Jael Ezran. Our sentinel would have come himself to address the matter, but he's in Portland at his daughter's wedding to, and I quote, 'the wrong guy'."

And with that, the tension in the room dissipated, and everyone was talking at once.

Joe got up, put a hand on Shane's shoulder as he had still not moved, squeezed gently, and then leaned sideways into me. The show of solidarity, without him even thinking about it, made me flush with happiness.

Shane rose slowly and lifted his hands for quiet.

"Last month our sentinel stripped one of our number, Tarin, from our clutch. He had been conspiring with demons."

"Why?"

"He needed money," Kyle chimed in. "His hearth, she wants things, and we all knew it was leading down a bad road, but there is nothing you say to a warder about his hearth."

No, there wasn't.

"I would do whatever my hearth asked of me as well," Kyle said.

"Are you married?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes, sir, just as long as you all—six years."

And in his mind, his marriage and Joe's and mine were exactly the same. A hearth was a home, and a warder's home was not to be trifled with. When I saw his eyes flick to Shane, I realized that his fellow warder was making him uncomfortable with the way he was looking at Joe. I wasn't all that crazy about it either.

"The demons, Arcan and Emir, they said that Breka had paid Tarin so that I shouldn't have been there in my father-in-law's store," I said to both of the warders.

"I have no idea who that is, but just like you all, we don't chat with demons. We kill them."

And that was good to hear.

"So where is this Tarin now?"

"We'll find him; it's not your concern."

"Oh, the hell it's not," Leith said quickly. "We need to speak to Tarin and find out what he promised these demons, and we definitely need to track down—" He turned to me. "Who?"

"Arcan and Emir."

"Yeah, them." Leith returned his attention to Kyle. "And I guess their boss, Breka, and kill them all."

"Tarin—"

I cut Shane off. "What's his real name?"

“Tanner. Tanner King.”

“So Tanner,” I said, humanizing the warder so we all understood what it was that we were talking about, “is no longer a part of your clutch, correct?”

“Yes.”

“So basically you have to find him first and protect him, because once the demons find out that they paid him for a service that doesn’t exist, they’re going to hunt him down and kill him.”

“Yeah,” Kyle agreed. “I know where he hangs out. We can go pick him up first.”

“But he’s no longer a warder, and he’s corrupted himself,” Shane reminded us. “He should reap what he’s sown.”

“Meaning what?” Leith asked.

“We cannot be expected to—”

“Oh, the hell we can’t,” Leith snapped, his eyes firing even as he turned to Joe’s parents. “I beg your pardon, folks, but—”

“No, no.” Deb smiled at him. “It sounds like you need to say *something*.”

“I do,” he told her before turning back to Shane. “That’s bullshit! Tell Marcus and me where this guy lives, and we’ll take care of it.”

Both Shane and Kyle looked at him like he’d grown another head.

“What?” he asked sharply.

“We’ll all go,” Kyle soothed my fellow warder. “Shane didn’t mean to imply that we would not take care of our own.” He turned to look at him. “Did you?”

“Shit,” Shane hissed, defeated.

I put a hand on Leith's shoulder. "We need Ryan."

He nodded and dug into the pocket of his jeans for his phone.

"You don't need another warder here," Shane told me. "There are all four of us here. We can handle a—"

"You're down a warder because there's no way you replaced one that fast. Am I right?"

"Yeah, you're right."

"Okay, so, because I want to see Tanner and the demons he's trafficking with, Leith has to go with me. No warder ever goes anywhere alone, and I'm sure as hell not counting on one of you guys to watch my back."

"Absolutely not," Leith agreed from beside me.

"So since both Leith and I need to go with you, and because this house can't be sealed, I need another warder I trust to come and guard my family and my hearth."

No one said a word because, really, what argument could they offer me? I needed my own backup, and I needed a guard for the most important person in my life.

"Any questions?"

There were none.

THE two warders were on their phones while Leith and I sat in the living room with Joe's family and answered the million questions that were volleyed at us.

Demons were real?

Yes, very.

We killed them?

Yes, we did.

Was it a full-time job?

Definitely not.

Did we get paid?

Never.

How long were you a warder?

Until your body wouldn't let you be one anymore.

Did a lot of warders get killed?

All the time.

At which point Deb moved from where she was next to Elliot and came and sat down beside me and held my hand.

It was very telling.

Elliot explained how the first demon had come and shown him eyes full of blood and clawed him and basically scared the crap out of him.

“I had no idea what to do. I was afraid everyone would think I was nuts.”

“In San Francisco,” I said, “my friend Malic works with the police. My friend Ryan has a local television show he hosts, and he makes a point of visiting all kinds of businesses, and those include those that are owned by Wiccans, psychics, Gypsies, and the people that others go to for help with occurrences that would seem paranormal in nature. Our sentinel checks the paper, follows anything odd or out of the ordinary, and sends us to check things out.”

“Plus,” Leith told them, “we patrol, every night, two to three of us.”

“We don’t do any of that,” Shane said, having entered the room at the tail end of the conversation, walking around the couch and taking a seat beside Joe.

“You don’t patrol?” Leith asked.

Shane shook his head.

“Well, I for one think it’s dangerous not to be visible to the pit creatures.” Leith shrugged, gesturing at Joe’s father. “Case in point.”

The doorbell rang then, and Kyle asked Elliot and Deb’s permission to go get it. When he returned, he had two other men with him. Here were the rest of William Boyd’s warders.

They seemed like nice guys, pleasant, but as I looked at them, even at Shane and Kyle, I was struck by how different they seemed from the guys I normally hung out with dispatching demons back to hell. In comparison, they were lacking.

“So we have news,” Daniel, one of the newly arrived warders, began. “I guess this demon, Breka, already found out about Tanner and grabbed him out in front of his house earlier today. I talked to his hearth, and she said that he was taken right outside of their home.”

“Too bad he didn’t make it inside.”

Leith turned to me. “So even if you’re not a warder anymore you still have all the power?”

“I think your sentinel can strip you of the title,” I said, “but the strength is there until you die.” I looked over at Shane. “Although I’ve never heard of a warder being stripped and then not returned to the labarum council. I thought warders were placed in prison until they died if they were guilty of corruption.” I squinted at him.

He stared at me.

I waited.

“Shit.”

“Shane?” Kyle prodded.

“Okay, so, the guy the demons took, that’s a doppelganger. It’s not really Tanner.”

The other two warders turned in stunned silence to look at him.

“William said that only I could know,” Shane told the other three warders who belonged to his clutch. “We had to try and draw the demons out. We had to know who they were.”

“That’s horrible,” Joe said suddenly, his voice full of revulsion, and we all turned to look at him. “All this time you guys have been letting that woman think that her warder is still sleeping in her bed, and now that he’s taken, you’re just gonna let her believe that right there in front of her was the last time she’ll ever lay eyes on him.” A hard shiver passed through him.

“That’s vile.”

And it was. The warder’s hearth thought he was dead, and he had to deal with knowing that she thought that, and she had to deal with that being her reality. I couldn’t think of a more horrible price to pay.

“You need to tell her the truth and let her see him.” Joe’s voice splintered.
“That’s obscene.”

“It is,” Kyle agreed—his eyes, his face, everything about him having gone cold. “You let some... *thing*... sleep with the man’s hearth.” He took a breath. “I can’t believe William would condone such a thing.”

I wondered about them then, about their clutch. Jael kept no secrets from us, and we had none from each other.

“We’re so lucky,” I said under my breath.

“Yes, we are,” Leith agreed, his voice low.

“Do we know where this demon, this Breka, lives?”

“Yes,” Daniel said, turning from Shane with some effort, his brows still furrowed, his jaw still tight. He had, it seemed, the same reaction that Kyle had. “But his house is over a dimensional door. It’s not actually a house; it’s just an entrance to another plane.”

I frowned. “Do you guys not have experience with crossing dimensions?”

He shook his head.

“Okay, Leith and I can go alone, then. It’s not a problem.”

“But the problem is that Breka only allows people entrance to his home if they bring him a sacrifice.”

“I’m sorry?” I was aghast that they would allow something like that to happen in their territory. “What kind of warders are—”

“No, not a sacrifice like that.” Daniel shook his head. “Not one for slaughter or blood, but like a beautiful man or woman who he can sleep with if he wants.”

“Sleep with?” He had said sleep and not defile or rape, but I was still confused.

“Not hurt in any way,” Leith clarified.

“No, just screw,” Daniel clarified.

“Wait, people bring him dates?” I still wasn’t sure I understood.

“Sort of, I guess. Like when you take a hot girl with you to a club, you know you’re gonna get in because the doorman’s gonna wave you to the front of the line.”

“But you don’t normally leave the hot girl with the club owner.”

“Yeah, but I bet that goes on.”

I cleared my throat. “So the sacrifice is what—drugged or something, and this Breka, he sleeps with them?”

“No, it’s not even that sinister. The demon only glamours the willing and they always leave the next day.”

“You guys check.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” Leith sighed. “So you need a regular person, or someone they think is ordinary, with you or they won’t even let you in the door.”

“Yeah.”

“And they have to be hot.”

“Like smokin’ hot, yeah.”

“All right, then,” Leith said, turning to look at me. “So I can look like the regular person, and then once we’re in we can cut our way to Breka and the other demons and kill them. It’s just getting through the front door.”

I smiled at him.

“What?”

“You just basically said that you were hot.”

“Marcus, no one’s gonna believe that I’m the guy and you’re my arm candy.”

I chuckled. “Arm candy.”

“Seriously?”

“Shit,” I groaned. “You know this isn’t a two-man job.”

“No, it’s not.”

“We need help,” I told him solemnly.

“It can’t be helped, Marcus.”

“But if they’re close to killing the dark witch—”

“You know I hate that we’re calling her that,” Leith cut me off. “I know a lot of witches and none of them are like this demon’s mate. I want to call her something else.”

“Just her name, then,” I soothed. “Moira.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, so, if the guys are close to—”

“This is more important,” he assured me. “This is the family of your mate.” Leith was right. There was no argument.

“Can you find them?”

His smile was warm. “I can. It would be easier if it was the other way around and I was there and had to find you, but I can do it.”

I reached out and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Your energy is like a beacon, you know.” Leith patted my hand on him before he stepped away. “I can always sense where you are.”

I heard that from my fellow warders all the time.

“Come right back,” I ordered.

He nodded, then walked out of the room and out the front door. I noticed the looks from the other warders then. Surprise, astonishment, from all of them.

“What?”

“He can come back?” Shane asked.

A wormhole was how we traveled when we had to get to one another over any great distance. We opened up a channel from one warder to the other, and we jumped through what was basically a swirling vortex of wind. It took a great deal of energy and concentration, and I was guessing that none of them could do it more than once a day.

“Didn’t he wormhole here to you?”

I nodded.

“And,” Shane said slowly, waiting, “he’s gonna do it again?”

“I’m guessing,” Joe said as he stood up next to me, “that you guys don’t travel to and from other planes like the clutch in San Francisco does on a consistent basis, exercising that vortex muscle, huh?”

They didn’t say anything.

“Marcus’s sentinel told me that a warder builds power by being in a clutch of other warders that are dependent on one another. Did you know that?”

No one answered Joe.

“Warders have to spend time together every single day like they do in Marcus’s clutch. Do you guys do that? Are you guys even friends?”

He was listening for a word from any of them.

“Speak up,” Joe scolded them. “I’m blind.”

“No, we....” Shane stopped, then began again. “We don’t work like that, Joe. We all check in with our sentinel, but we all do different things and don’t talk to each other much. We’re all very strong warders. We don’t need to partner up the way they do in Marcus’s clutch.”

I was suddenly very happy that my sentinel was the kind of man he was. Jael had insisted on building a family, not just a team. He always said that

together we were strongest, not individually.

“When do you want us back to go with you to the demon’s home?” Kyle asked.

“You don’t have to go at all. Just tell me where—”

“No,” he insisted. “We’ll be there. When will your warders be here?”

“Give them at least a couple of hours.”

“Okay, so it’s six now. We’ll meet here at eight,” Shane said, getting up from the couch to stand beside Kyle.

“We’ll see you then,” I agreed.

Shane moved forward to reach Joe, but I instinctively clutched him to me, and just like always, the man turned and folded in tight.

“You’re very lucky,” Shane said to me.

“I know,” I told him. “And keep your distance when you return.”

“Why?”

I cleared my throat. “Leith is the rational one.”

And Shane understood then that coveting my hearth when my friends could see him might not be all that good for his health.

JOE stayed downstairs with his parents and talked about warders and hearths and when he had found out and why they didn’t need to be afraid and how safe they all were now that everyone knew. I went upstairs to shower and try to wake up. When I fell asleep on my feet, I realized that maybe it was time to get out of the water.

I was yawning while walking from the bathroom to the bedroom I shared with Joe. My eyes were watering when I fell down spread-eagle on the bed, and I closed them for a minute, just for a quick rest.

The shaking woke me.

“Awww, crap,” I grumbled, rolling over on my stomach.

“You gotta change soon,” Joe told me, hand massaging the back of my neck.

“Oh God, that feels so good,” I almost purred, lifting up to move into his lap.

He was chuckling softly. “I wanna go with you.”

“What? No.” I yawned.

“Please, Marcus.”

“How ‘bout *hell no*,” I reiterated. “Not gonna happen, Joseph.”

“Why not?”

“You don’t go with me to fight demons. I—”

“But if I go as that offering they were talking about, then—”

“You heard him. It’s a dimensional door. There’s no telling what he’s got in there, and you are not going to be guessing with me. No.”

“Marcus, I—”

“No,” I said loudly, lifting up, grabbing him, and pinning him under me with my weight.

“Marcus, goddammit, don’t manhandle me!”

But he loved it and we both knew it. I shifted over him to press my thigh between his legs and began suckling on his throat.

“Stop.” He jolted beneath me, hands on my chest, clutching at my skin as I kissed over the line of his jaw back to his earlobe.

The whimper that came out of him sent blood rushing to my cock.

“Shit,” I groaned, realizing too late that I was playing with fire.

“Marcus.” He moaned my name, arms lifting, wrapping around my neck, pulling me down to him.

“Joey,” I sighed, trying to lift up off him.

“No,” he whispered, swallowing hard, wetting his lips, his breath warm on my face. “I missed you. You need to fuck me now.”

And the way he said it left no doubt in my mind that he needed me just as badly as I needed him. We were locked into the same mindset, had been for years, so I didn’t have to guess what felt good or where to touch him. Words were unnecessary.

I lifted myself up, loosened the towel around my hips, and tossed it at the chair by the desk. He rolled over under me, passed me a tube of lube from under the pillow that would have been mine—I slept closest to the door wherever we were—and I watched as he hurriedly stripped out of his jeans and briefs and climbed back onto the bed.

His beautiful ass, so taut and round, beckoned me. I couldn’t help bending to take a bite out of it.

“Oh please,” he whimpered, pushing back against my mouth.

He was gorgeous on his hands and knees in the middle of the bed. Head back, eyes closed, waiting, trembling, spreading his legs apart so his pink hole was there, ready for me.... I could not even imagine anything more bewitching than my man.

“Jesus, Joe,” I groaned, leaning forward, my tongue gliding over his puckered entrance.

“No,” he hissed. “I don’t want you to lick me or suck me or do anything else but *fuck* me. I want you inside me now.”

“I don’t want to hurt—”

“Marcus Roth, when have you ever hurt me?”

Never was the answer. Not once.

“You’re the only man who has never hurt me in any way.”

Which basically answered any question I’d ever had about Shane Harris.

“I’ll tell you if you want me to,” Joe asked, because he knew what I was thinking. He always knew.

“Please.”

“We hid things in high school,” he told me as I opened the flip-top lid of the lube. “And then the summer before college, he told me he couldn’t see me anymore. He didn’t want me to get hurt.”

I understood why and now so did Joe.

“So he became a warder then, Marcus, and he—oh!” Joe’s voice cracked as I slid a slippery finger inside him. “Figured that because I was blind that I wasn’t strong enough to be the hearth of a warder.”

“You don’t know that.”

“The fuck I don’t. What else could it be? He looked at me, just like everyone has done my whole life except you, and saw someone that had to be taken care of, not the other way around.”

But why? “He knew you guys could go to bed together,” I said as I added a finger inside him, scissoring them apart slowly and gently, stroking at the

same time, pushing in, easing out, back and forth, over and over, going deeper with each press, finally reaching his gland.

“How would he know that? All we ever did was suck each other off.”

“But even that would have told him you were strong enough to be a hearth.”

“Oh, fuck, Marcus!” He gasped, his body going rigid for a second. “He didn’t think I could be the hearth of a warder. All he saw was my blindness, not the home I could make, not the partner I could be. You’re the only one who ever saw an equal.”

It wasn’t true. I had met Joe’s exes at the supermarket, at restaurants, at concerts, out at clubs. There had been a lot of them, the man having been a serial dater before me. Joe bored easily, and because he was blind, most men felt like they had to take care of him, and Joe would simply not have it.

He kept his own apartment for a year after we got together because he didn’t want me to think he needed me. He wanted me, but I wasn’t necessary—until I was.

“Do you remember what you said when I invited you to move in?” I asked, adding a third finger, spreading them, stretching him.

“Yes,” he replied, his voice barely above a whisper, pushing back, wanting me deeper. “I said I didn’t need to move in; we could just be fuck buddies.”

“And what did I say?”

“You—Marcus,” he whined. “You didn’t say anything. You just got up and walked to the door.”

It was all or nothing with me, which scared the hell out of most people. I loved hard and possessively, and for every man before Joe, it had been suffocating and simply too much. But for Joe, who always spoke of freedom and independence and no commitments, the wall that broke that day was the one around his heart.

“And what did you say, Joseph?” I delved as I grabbed hold of his perfect ass and spread his cheeks.

“I said ‘stay’.”

“Is that what you said?”

“I said, ‘Marcus, please stay. Don’t leave me, don’t ever leave me.... I’ll be with you forever, but please stay now—don’t go.’”

“You said ‘stay’,” I growled, sliding my lube-slicked cock deep inside of him in one powerful forward thrust.

“Fuck!”

I remained still for a second, buried in his ass, letting him adjust to me, savoring the feel of his tense muscles rippling around me, squeezing. He was so tight, so hot, and looking at my groin flush against him, the paleness of his skin contrasting to the darkness of mine, I was struck, as I always was, by the merging of our flesh.

“Marcus, you gotta move.”

Reaching between his legs, I stroked him from balls to tip until he shuddered.

“I’m gonna come with how full I am,” he confessed, shivering some more. “And I want you to just have me—God, Marcus, why are you holding back?”

Because normally I made sure he was close before I pounded inside of him. I wasn’t small, the opposite actually, and so I was careful to never—

“Marcus, you know better.”

And I did.

I pulled out partway and then grabbed hold of his hip, anchored myself, and drove inside hard and fast.

He swore and babbled, and the filthy words coming out of his perfect mouth drove me right out of my mind.

“Marcus, baby, please, could you just fuck my brains out already?”

I smiled and eased out again only to plunge back inside, beginning the driving, rhythmic thrusting that would bring us both to a shuddering climax.

“Jesus, Marcus, you feel so fucking good.”

A lot of men couldn’t swallow my cock, instead choking on the length and the girth, and many didn’t want me buried to the balls in their ass, terrified of being hurt. So I was careful and respectful and had always made sure that my lovers were ready and willing to take me in. It was only with Joe that I had ever just let go. The man loved my dick. He could take me down the back of his throat, sucking hard, and would straddle my hips and impale himself on my shaft with his head thrown back in ecstasy as I brought him to release. He looked delicate and small, but in bed, the man was demanding and vocal about his needs. Big and thick and hard was how he liked his ass filled. I was perfect for him.

“Marcus,” he cried, writhing under me as I thrust into him, so close, barely breathing, loving him wrapped around me.

“Joe, I’m gonna come.”

I felt his muscles bear down, felt him tighten, and then I fucked him through his orgasm even as my balls tightened and I came deep inside him seconds later.

The man annihilated me.

He was shaking hard, and when he collapsed, I crushed him under me, both of us panting and sweating, aftershocks spilling through us even as I stayed where I was. Joe liked me there, inside until his muscles released me. When the spasms eased, I could slowly, gently, withdraw, but I had to wait until his body was ready for me to go. I loved the closeness at the end, loved feeling his heartbeat from the inside, the last bit of our joining.

When he stilled, I slid free and rolled over on my back. Instantly he was there in my arms, claiming my mouth. I opened for him, and the kiss was as hungry as the lovemaking had been. He tasted so good that when he tried to pull free, I bit his plump bottom lip to keep him there.

“Quit.” He laughed softly, the grin on his beautiful mouth stopping my heart.

“Kiss me some more,” I urged.

“This is not helping you wake up.” His smile widened. “Jesus, Marcus, you’re gonna pass out on the drive over there.”

Oh, but it was worth it. “Just let me have you.”

“Don’t whine.”

I growled at him, my hand around the nape of his neck easing him back down.

“Marcus.”

His lips were turned up into a wicked smile that made my stomach flip over.

“Are you looking at me?”

I grunted.

“Baby.”

I stopped staring at his mouth and looked up into the pale blue I loved, marveling as I always did at the flecks of cobalt in them.

“There was a time that I loved Shane Harris.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

“But you know that since the day I took you home with me that there’s only been you.”

I knew that, because as hard as I loved, as completely and possessively, as all-consuming, Joe was worse. With me—and from what I understood, only ever with me—he was like a tiger in the body of a man. Once he claimed you, God help you if you tried to get away. I had understood when the man moved in with me that I belonged to him body and soul and nothing was taking me away from him, not even my own jealousy.

“I love you,” he said before he kissed me.

But I didn’t need to be told.

V

IT WAS so nice to see them. As soon as I walked into the living room, Malic levered off the wall he was leaning on and crossed to me. He didn't hug me—it wasn't what we did—but his hand went to my shoulder and held me. There was a time not too long ago when even being affectionate with my best friend in front of my hearth was problematic. Joe had mistakenly thought Malic wanted me. It was not the case. Even if they wanted to, warders getting together did not end well. Malic and Ryan had even tried, to no avail.

Sometimes warders—and it happened to a lot of them, because warders could be women or men—were drawn to one another. They fought together, bled together, and so the camaraderie that came with that sometimes got mistaken for more. The problem was that another warder could not provide a sanctuary. Another warder could not provide a home, a place where you were loved and cared for and welcomed with open arms. If two warders were together, they would fight side by side, go home, and fuck all the adrenaline out of their systems. But afterward, when that was done, when the pulse-pounding rush had dissipated and you needed to be held and kissed and even be something as simple as fed, you were both looking at the other, waiting for them to deliver. A warder, simply put, needed a caretaker, and another warder could never be that.

Coming home bruised and bloody, carrying the weight of what I'd seen with me—the gore, the horror—I was normally not even capable of speech. But I was met at the door each and every time by a man who gave me a quick kiss before having me step onto a garbage bag to strip off everything from head to toe and then pointing me toward the shower. As I lurched through our living room, I could feel the warmth of our home, smell the food, and hear the soft music. Joe liked a lot of alternative bands, so the sound reminded me of him, which was good. It was all so comforting that sometimes, just for a second, I thought I would fall apart. But he would check my progress, put a hand on the small of my back or give my ass a pat or take my hand, and lead me to the shower. And then he'd leave me under

the steaming water, and all of it, the blood, the memory, and the pain, would just roll off me, down the drain.

Sometimes, if it wasn't so bad and he could see that it had not been, he would join me in the shower and run his hands all over my skin before dropping to his knees and taking my cock down the back of his throat. Those were the best starts to my homecoming. But other times, when he would touch me and I'd shiver, he'd wait until I finished my shower, dried off, changed, and returned to the living room. There I would find him, normally reading, his fingertips skimming over the page, because he knew I didn't like the television on when I got home from warding. Any loud noise would make me cringe. So the music was low, and the only other sound in the room was his voice... and that was really all I wanted to hear.

"Come here," he would call, and I would move fast, lay down on the couch, and settle my head in his lap.

Joe always sat on one end so I could stretch out completely and wrap my arm around his knee as he pet me. He would then tell me what he made for dinner, point at the enormous glass of ice water on the coffee table just waiting for me, and tell me that after dinner he was going to have his wicked way with me. At which point I would get up, sit back on the couch, and he would climb into my lap.

"I bought this new wine today too," he'd say as he smiled at me. "Gonna get you drunk off your ass."

And I knew I was home and loved and safe... and now Malic knew what that was like, too, because he had just found his own hearth. When Joe met Malic's man and heard them talking, he'd realized that he was jealous, had been jealous for five years, for nothing. Now, when I stepped back from Malic, Joe was there to walk into his arms and hug him.

"Thank you for coming to protect him," Joe said adamantly, clutching at my best friend.

"Of course." Malic's voice rumbled low in his chest. "Always, Joe."

Looking up, I wondered where the rest of Joe's family was. Why weren't they there with me meeting Jackson and Malic and....

"Where's Ry?" I asked.

Leith rolled his eyes and then tipped his head toward the kitchen. I understood at once. Ryan Dean was holding court.

It wasn't just that my fellow warder used to be a model and was now a television host. It was more than that. People saw him and just fell under a spell of charm and beauty and warmth. The man was irresistible and surely had Elliot and Deb and Barb completely riveted with whatever he was talking about.

I looked back at Jackson and Malic. "I'm sorry that I had to pull you guys from chasing Moira, but—"

"Marcus," Jackson said, his deep, dark brown eyes soft as he gazed at me. "Your hearth and the family of your hearth takes precedence over everything else. You know that."

"In our clutch it does," I told him.

"Whaddya mean?" Malic asked, his voice, even after so many years, still carrying a hint of his homeland that had been transported with his parents when they immigrated to the United States from Stockholm. His grandmother, his parents, all had the same accent, he'd told me, and growing up in their house, there was no way for him to miss adopting it as well. I hoped he'd never lose it.

"You won't believe what the sentinel here did to one of his warders," Joe interrupted, moving forward to hug Jackson at the same time.

Malic and Jackson listened to the story, and they were both frowning by the end.

"They let this fake warder bed his hearth." Jackson swallowed hard. "That's as much of a betrayal as what the warder did to his sentinel and his clutch."

“I agree,” Leith said, his voice icy. “And I think when we’re done here, we go see her and tell her the truth. She deserves that.”

“How long have you guys been here?”

“Couple minutes before you came down,” Malic answered me. “Jacks and I came together, and Ryan before that.”

Which explained why my fellow warder had begun entertaining Joe’s family.

“Where’s Raph?”

“He’s home watching Jules and Simon and Dylan.”

“And Jael is okay there alone?”

“He has Deidre and her warders visiting, remember?”

“Then who’s watching their territory?”

“Apparently there’s a lot of small towns there, and some have warders and some don’t, but there’s a lot of crossover between the territories that do have warders, so it’s all covered for the time they’re gone.”

I smiled at Malic. “Lucky.”

“Fortuitous,” he agreed. “Now what’s your plan here? Once we get through the front door, we just start hacking our way in there until we reach this Breka and then send him to the pit as well?”

“Yes, they all die tonight.”

Malic squinted at me. “I talked to you before you got on the plane last night. Have you slept yet?”

I shook my head.

“Oh for crissakes, Marcus,” he groaned. “This can—”

“It can’t,” I told him. “You guys need to get back to hunting Moira, and I need to get home and help you. So this needs to be taken care of right now.”

He nodded as we all heard voices and turned.

Ryan was leading Joe’s family back into the living room. “Hey.” He greeted me with the megawatt smile and kaleidoscope gaze. His hazel eyes changed all the time, sometimes green, sometimes brown, sometimes a mixture. They switched with his mood, and at that moment I was swallowed in a clear olive that was something to see.

“Thanks for coming, Ry,” I said.

“Of course,” he said, like, where else would he be?

“Did you feel that?” Jackson asked suddenly.

“Feel wh...?” I asked even as I heard feet on the stairs.

“Who else is in the house?” Malic asked, drawing the spatha from behind his back, startling Joe’s family even as he stepped in front of them.

“Hey,” Raphael said as he charged into the room.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Malic growled. “Yell, asshole. I could’ve taken your head off.”

“Yeah, right,” Raphael scoffed, crossing the room fast to reach Jackson.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Jackson snapped at the man—creature—he loved.

Raphael Caliva was a kyrie, a demonic bounty hunter born in purgatory. He was not a demon, but he wasn’t human either. He still scared me just a little. I was wary, but Joe found him fascinating and never missed an opportunity to ask him a million questions. Watching Raphael when he sat with the man I loved, smiling lazily and talking to him, had gone a long way to helping me accept him.

“Nice to see you too.” He grinned evilly and leaned in to brush a kiss across Jackson’s mouth before he turned to look at me. “I’m going right back to guard your hearths, but Moira is here somewhere, so Jael said to get here and warn you.”

“What’re you talking about?” Leith asked.

“I just told you.”

“How the hell do you know who’s here or not?” Malic barked.

“Ask him nicely,” Jackson ordered the bigger man. “That’s my mate you’re talking to.”

At which point Raphael almost glowed. He lived to hear Jackson be possessive of him.

“Tell us what’s going on, please, Raph,” I interceded.

He shrugged. “Okay, so, to me, the planes of hell are like a giant spider web. Each ring has its own pulse, and everything that crosses a ring leaves a footprint. So she came this way toward Jackson as soon as she felt him move.”

I turned to look at my friend. “She’s after you.”

“Because of me,” Raphael said. “She’s going to kill my mate because I killed hers.”

My eyes returned to the kyrie.

“So.” Raphael took a breath. “I’m going home, and I’m taking Joe and his family with me, and you guys find her, kill her, and find this demon and kill him, and then I’ll bring them all back.”

Everyone started speaking at once, but I raised my hands and called for quiet. I had no idea why they all responded, but as normally happened, the room fell silent.

“That is the best idea I’ve heard all day,” I told Joe and his parents and his sister. “And you have to understand: he’s trusting me to protect Jackson, who is all he has in the world, and I’m trusting him to do the same. So... that’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

“Marcus,” Elliot began. “I—”

“You guys better call Henry and tell him you’re not coming to the dance tonight,” I told them. “I don’t want him to worry, but you’re all leaving with Raph.”

“I’m not going,” Joe assured me.

I grabbed his bicep and dragged him into a far corner of the room before whirling him around to face me.

“No!”

“Oh yes,” I said flatly. “You need to go home and keep your family calm while we sort this out, Joseph. I need you safe, and thank God for Raph and his displacement wave. He can move all of you, and there’s no way any of the rest of us could. Jael will be there, too, I’m sure, but I need you to go and ease them through it. Think about them, how scared they must all be, how freaked out they must be, and—”

“I have to stay with you!”

“Not this time,” I said. “It’s gonna be bad, Joe, really bad.”

He sucked in his breath. “Even more reason for me to—”

“I forbid it,” I insisted and bent and kissed him.

He fought and pushed and dug his hands into my T-shirt to try to get me off him, but I had a hand on the back of his head, fisted in his hair, and my mouth was sealed over his. I pressed against his lips until he opened them, and my tongue snaked over his, and when he moaned deeply, I knew I had him. I kissed him until he went limp in my grip, hands now holding on for dear life, wanting me closer.

“You,” I said, parting our lips, both of us softly heaving for breath, “will go with Raphael and keep him calm. Do you understand? Imagine what this is doing to him. Leaving Jackson? He *just* got Jackson, and now this? C’mon, Joe, I need you now. I need you to show him that he has to have faith.”

He growled. “Why didn’t you say that in the first place, you stupid ass?”

I hugged him tight and he wrapped his arms around my neck and squeezed back just as hard.

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Marcus Roth. Come get me as soon as you can.”

“You know I could never stay away.”

“Good.”

The hug went on until Malic cleared his throat, and I let go. Walking over to join the others, holding Joe’s hand in mine, I was faced with Deborah Locke.

“You’ll be safe with Raphael,” I said.

She nodded before lifting her hands to my face. “You be safe, Marcus. You’re my son too, you know.”

I turned my head to kiss her palm, and I saw her eyes suddenly fill.

“Jesus, Marcus, way to make my mother cry,” Barbara said, sniffling.

“Your family is nice, Marcus.” Malic smiled. “I hope mine will be too.” He was going with Dylan for the first time to Atlanta for Christmas.

“It will be.”

“Families are good,” Leith sighed, thinking, I was sure, about the one he shared with his hearth, Simon Kim. They had, by all accounts, welcomed the man with open arms.

“Let’s go,” Raphael said, moving forward, taking Joe’s other hand.

Joe squeezed mine tight before he dropped it, trailing after Raphael toward the foyer.

Elliot hugged me and thanked me, turned and thanked my friends, and then led his wife after Joe and Raphael. Barbara was the last to leave, wanting to kiss Ryan goodbye.

Leith cleared his throat.

“What?” Ryan asked.

“She knows I’m gay. What about you?”

He frowned at Leith. “I’m sure she knows, but watch, she’ll meet Julian and forget all about me.”

Leith shrugged and Ryan scowled.

“Jesus, we’re all so fuckin’ lucky,” Jackson said suddenly.

All eyes were on him.

“I mean, I feel lucky,” he sighed. “Don’t you guys?”

We all agreed that we were.

“Okay so, since we’re all blessed and all”—I smiled gently—“let’s make sure none of the guys we go home to ever have to live without us.”

“Absolutely,” Ryan agreed first. “I don’t plan to let anyone else have Julian Nash, ever.”

“So let’s be careful,” I said as the doorbell rang.

It was Shane and Kyle, and I really wasn’t all that surprised that they were the only ones who had come. The other two had not struck me as fighters.

“I suspect,” Jackson told the two men, “that your sentinel will be in the market for more than one new warder.”

Malic made the tsk sound in the back of his throat and eyed them coolly.

“They’re good men,” Shane assured us. “They just think this is a suicide mission.”

“You disagree?” I asked.

“No, but we won’t let you go in there alone, either.”

And I appreciated that, even though with my team with me, I really wasn’t worried.

“Where are Joe and his family?” Shane asked.

“They were taken back to my house,” Jackson told him. “Or your place, Marcus.” He looked at me. “I’m not totally sure where.”

“How?”

“His mate is a kyrie,” Ryan said, tipping his head back at Jackson. “So he can use a displacement wave just like your sentinel.”

“Your mate is a demon?” Kyle was aghast.

“A kyrie is not a demon,” Leith spoke up before Jackson could get a word out. “Everyone knows that.”

“Fine, whatever,” Shane growled. “Have any of you given any thought to how we’re going to get into the demon’s home?”

They all looked at me for some unfathomable reason.

“We need a diversion,” Leith offered. “In the form of someone ‘hot’, you said. The sacrifice, right?”

“Exactly,” Kyle told us. “Every night is like some big party out there. Daniel and me, we go out there a lot to check that the number of people going in is the same number that walked out in the light of day.”

“Okay.” Ryan shrugged. “So we can blend if we look like we’re just going into a party there?”

“Yeah.”

I looked over my fellow warders, all of us. “And um, who brought club clothes?”

“Like, how dressed up are the people that go?” Ryan asked Shane.

He tipped his head like he really didn’t want to say.

“It’s not club clothes.” Kyle grimaced. “It’s more fuck-me clothes.”

“You couldn’t have said this before?” Malic griped at him.

“You said we were cutting our way in,” Kyle reminded him.

“Cut our way to the head demon,” Malic said. “We can’t fight all the way from the front door; we have to be let in. We have no idea how many are in there.”

“Especially if it’s over a dimensional door,” Jackson chimed in.

“Okay, so then if you guys go in as couples, it should work.”

“And you guys?”

“Two couples and one threesome,” Ryan suggested.

Leith groaned.

“It’s okay, honey.” Jackson grinned, wrapping an arm around Leith’s neck, his mouth close to his ear. “I’ll be gentle.”

Ryan snorted out a laugh, and I started grinning.

Leith told us all to go to hell.

“We’re already going,” Malic reminded him.

I THOUGHT Shane was going to swallow his tongue. Even Kyle, who was straight—who had, from what he said, the most beautiful woman in the world at home—could not take his eyes off Ryan Dean.

“Why did the rest of us even need to change?” Leith grumbled, squirming in his black leather pants, uncomfortable in the skin-tight, brushed silk dress shirt he had on. It was clinging to his biceps, triceps, and his rippling abdomen. He did not, as a rule, wear anything remotely like what he had on. Ever. Leith was quiet, reserved, and liked cargo pants and denim shirts, jeans and cotton T-shirts. In his current outfit, complete with black leather boots, he looked stunning but really out of his comfort zone.

“Because we all need to fit in,” Malic growled, dressed like I was in a suit, his Prada, mine a Hugo Boss.

“Why do you guys get to be dressed like that?” Leith was really irritated, and I was on the verge of smacking him.

“Because we’re tops, sweetheart,” Malic informed him. “The rest of you do both right?”

“You know what, Mal—” Leith began.

“Just,” Jackson chuckled, grabbing Leith, yanking him up beside him, “don’t get all in a twist for nothing.”

Jackson himself was dressed in the kind of leather pants that laced up the sides and up the crotch. I couldn’t tell if he was wearing underwear or not, and it wasn’t my place to ask. The black Lycra T-shirt he was wearing did

not reach the top of the red pants, instead showing off the treasure trail from under his navel to right above his groin. The pants hugged his slim hips, riding sinfully low and seductive. His hair was tousled like he'd just gotten out of bed, and the beard and mustache were very sexy.

“Who do I get?” I teased.

They all pointed at Ryan.

“You’re the only one people are gonna believe,” Malic yawned, moving to stand between Jackson and Leith, separating them, hand fisting in each of their hair. “He overdid it.”

“He’s right,” Jackson chuckled, pulling free of Malic’s grip. “Who knew that store even had stuff like that in there?”

I rolled my head to look at Ryan Dean. What the hell...?

He was in chaps, and they were not like any I had ever seen in my life. They were red with some swirling design down the sides embroidered in gold, and they belted around his hips. He was wearing a thong so that his cock was nestled inside, most of it covered, but his perfect, round, taut ass was on full display. The chaps were hot, ridiculously so, and the fact that it was all he was wearing was enough to make him the absolute focus of any room he walked into.

“How are you gonna fight in that?” I called over to the man preening in the kitchen, admiring his own reflection in the sliding glass door.

He turned to look at me. “What?”

“Fight. You. In that,” I said irritably. “Jesus, Ry.”

I had been surprised at the store Shane had taken us to at nine o’clock at night. Kyle was not.

“Lexington is a very cosmopolitan city, you know. We’re not out in the damn boondocks.”

But I didn't know.

"I can do a lot of things in this." Ryan wagged his eyebrows at me.

I threw up my hands, turned, and bumped into Shane.

"Can we go?" I barked, annoyed for whatever reason that he was leering at my friend.

"He's really beautiful," Shane said under his breath. "His hearth must be really hot."

Julian Nash was a handsome man, but not beautiful. He was tall and muscular and had dark blue-black eyes and glasses. He was not the kind of man you saw first; he was the one you noticed last. He was the guy interested in talking to you, learning your secrets.

"Julian's...." What could I say? "Hey," I said to Ryan as he joined us. "Describe Julian to Shane."

He turned and smiled warmly. "Julian is the only man who I get down on my hands and knees and wiggle my ass for."

Shane caught his breath, and Leith finally let go of his tension and laughed.

I grabbed Ryan's hand and tugged him after me toward the front door. "C'mon, pretty boy. Let's go."

We had to take two cars for the long drive from Nicholasville to Fayette County. The ride down the two-lane country roads was long and lulling, and I gave up and fell asleep. When I was finally shaken awake, I realized that we were parked and everyone was out of the car but me.

After getting out, I put my jacket back on to cover the sheaths on my back. I was not carrying my swords—Kyle was, under his leather duster—but I had Ryan's katana and Jackson's rapier. Malic was packing his spatha and Leith's kilij under his jacket. My hook swords were not discreet, small weapons. I normally carried them criss-crossed on my back in a double scabbard. Kyle, who was dressed like someone out of the Matrix—which

amused the hell out of Jackson for some reason—had offered to carry in my swords. There was no guard at the door checking for weapons. It was Sodom and Gomorrah in there. There were demons throwing the party, after all. Weapons were not a consideration. And besides, I was certain, as I eased Ryan forward in front of me, my hand on the small of his back, that no one would be giving anyone but my fellow warder the time of day.

As I suspected, the doorman took one look at Ryan Dean and waved us forward to the front of the line.

Ryan did his walk, the runway stride, the strut, head back, wet lips parted, glittering eyes forward, doing the glide that made him look fluid and boneless. It was impressive, and I wondered, just for a minute, how Julian dealt with everyone wanting a piece of Ryan Dean.

He reached the front and tipped his head up, his eyes drifting slowly open, the look wicked and hot and molten.

I saw the doorman shiver.

“Welcome,” the man barely got out. I was sure that with his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth was making it hard to articulate. “Please step inside.”

“Thank you,” Ryan purred, moving by him.

No one saw me, no one saw Malic, and most importantly, no one saw Kyle. We moved through the crowd and people made a path for Ryan.

“What the hell,” Leith grumbled behind me.

Apparently he and Jackson were groped quite a bit as we moved through the mob, especially Leith with his long hair trailing behind him.

“It’s ’cause you’re pretty,” Jackson chuckled even as hands slid over him, grabbed his ass, and tried to stop him.

“How come no one’s grabbin’ at Ry?”

“It’s the walk.” Malic was grinning when I looked over my shoulder at him. “It’s the ‘I’m too good for you’ walk. No one would dare put their hands on him.”

And it occurred to me that he was right. Ryan was movie star handsome, so no one even tried to touch him. Maybe before Julian he had been lonely instead of busy.

Once we reached the back, I helped Ryan up on a low platform to dance. The trance music was not something I had ever liked, but Ryan had been gyrating in clubs for years, from New York to Paris to Rome to Tokyo and back at home in the city by the bay. It was second nature to him.

The hostess came, and we ordered a round of drinks. She offered other things, party favors, and Malic smiled at her and said maybe later. She looked concerned until Jackson took her hand and stroked over her knuckles, smiling up at her at the same time. She was charmed by the time she left.

“I wasn’t charming?” Malic asked.

“You sound like a cop,” I told my friend.

“How?”

“I don’t know.” I sighed, smiling at him. “But you come off like a vice detective or something.”

“I’m just not pretty like the rest of you.” He smirked.

I wasn’t either, not like Leith and Jackson and Ryan. They were stunning. Malic and I were more handsome, if one needed to apply an adjective to us. We sort of blended into the background, forgettable, but neither of us a breathtaking beauty.

“Don’t kid yourselves.” Jackson yawned, smiling at me.

I had no idea what that meant.

Shane looked uncomfortable, and so I took a seat next to him. Malic sat and pulled Leith down into his lap. It looked odd to me, but it wouldn't to anyone else. The only one who belonged in the big man's lap was his hearth, Dylan Shaw. Dylan would have been wriggling around, trying to wedge Malic's groin between his cheeks. I liked watching my friend get all flustered by his young, irrepressible mate.

I wasn't sure what to expect, but it didn't take long. Again, Ryan was like a beacon, and there wasn't a lot of him left to the imagination.

"Here we go," Jackson said under his breath as one man, flanked by another two, approached our table.

He stood for a minute, looking Ryan up and down, leering, before he passed him to face... me. Why it was always me, I had no idea. Yes, I was the oldest at thirty-five, but the stranger didn't know that.

"Hello." The man extended his hand, "I'm Breka. I own this club. I would love to have you and your friends join me for a private party."

"Breka," I said, getting up, Malic moving in behind the other two men, Jackson beside him. "I have a lot to talk to you about."

He squinted at me at the same time the man behind him gasped.

When he tried to turn, I grabbed his bicep and yanked him sideways, throwing him down onto the suede-covered sectional I had been sitting on a moment earlier.

Malic stepped back and, wielding the spatha powerfully, he easily cleaved the demon in half before a hole opened in the floor and he dropped the creature into it. Jackson's movement was similar but more artful, with finesse. The demon's throat was torn open with a quick slash of the rapier before he too was dropped into a black hole that swallowed him fast.

Between the thumping, driving music, the ferocious wall of conversation, and the crowd, no one saw a thing. I stood towering over Breka, and I saw

him trembling. Squatting down, I took the scabbard Kyle passed me at the same time.

“Holy fuck,” Shane said beside me. “What the hell was that?”

“That’s the warder void,” Jackson told him. “Just like you—”

“I have never seen anything like that.” Shane’s voice was shaky. “We.... no one dies like that. It’s bloody and messy, and... now I get why you thought we could get in and out of here without creating a huge scene. I had no idea.”

“Jesus,” Kyle said, and I could feel his eyes studying my profile. “Our sentinel said that some clutches were more powerful—the older the warders, the longer they stay together—but I ain’t never seen the likes of you all.”

“Breka,” I addressed the demon now quivering before me. “I want to talk to you about Elliot Locke and about Emir and Arcan, and I want to see the warder Tarin that you have in your possession. Do you understand?”

He nodded.

“I won’t touch you if you do what I say.”

More furious nodding.

“Now which way are we following you?”

He pointed left.

“Okay, you tell Ry which way to walk, and then we’ll follow him, all right?”

“Yes.” He almost choked on the word.

Breka rose first; I walked at his side with Ryan leading the way. We moved as a single unit through the crowd. No one bothered to ask Breka where he

was going. They could all see. He was following the guy with the gorgeous ass.

“Tell me how you do that.”

“Do what?” I asked Shane as we walked.

“The warder void, you called it. Tell me how you make it appear.”

“We don’t. It just is. I thought all warders were the same. I thought they all dealt the same death to every demon: the hole to the pit.”

“No, not every clutch is as strong as yours, Marcus. Did you know that every clutch has a center? Just like every warder has a hearth who is their omphalos, *their* center, every clutch has the same thing in a single warder. Kill that one warder, you destroy the clutch.”

I stopped walking because, really, there was just no way he was suddenly this fount of information. Turning, I found a woman, not Shane Harris at all.

“Moira,” I said at the same time I saw the dagger.

I spun as she thrust forward, felt the blade drag across my arm, and watched, helplessly, as it was buried deep in Malic’s chest. He had moved fast to put himself between the lethal stroke and Ryan’s vulnerable back. The witch had aimed for me, her momentum had carried her toward Ryan, and she had ended up catching my friend.

“Malic!” Leith yelled, and there was screaming around us instantly.

I dove forward and caught him as he dropped to the floor, Leith’s kilij and the spatha flying free, clattering away from us as we fell together. The blood was all I could see.

“Marcus!” Leith roared, and I turned my head to see the witch coming for me. Her blade was raised, she had talons instead of hands, and I had no way to defend myself from either. My swords that Kyle had thrown toward me before he ran were on the other side of Malic, and I couldn’t reach them. I

had one arm under his back, the other over the gaping hole in his heart, pressing down to stem the flow of blood out of his body, but I moved as far as I could trying to grasp one.

She reached me, for me, and I did all I could.

I took a breath and released the pulse of power.

She screamed and tensed, slowed just enough, hesitated for a second, and I saw the flash along the blade, the outline of the steel, the way the light slid over the length as my hook sword, wielded by Ryan Dean, came and took the head of the witch.

Hot blood hit me like a sprinkler, and then the body flew into me, knocking me back and away from Malic under its weight.

“Marcus!” Jackson cried out my name, and I shook my head, trying to get my bearings. It was like I was in a dream, not in control of my muscles, my speed, or my strength as everything moved around me.

There was so much blood pumping from the headless torso of the witch, and I slid through it, slipped over the marble floor as I scrambled back to Malic’s side. I peeled off my jacket as I moved, drew Ryan’s katana from my back, and tossed it to him, then did the same with Jackson’s rapier, throwing it to the other warder. I yanked the scabbards off that had held the blades, then my shirt, and bunching it up, shoved it over Malic’s wound and pressed down hard. I grabbed him, cradled him tight, held him close, terrified because he was turning gray, because of the fall of his head, the heaviness of his limbs.

I opened the channel, screamed my need for my sentinel, and prayed even as I heard the shriek from the other side of the room.

“Hurry, Marcus,” Jackson yelled again, dropping into his stance, the rapier gleaming in the low light.

I looked for Kyle and saw him running with the rest of the terrified crowd for the exit. I had no idea when the witch had traded places with Shane, had

no idea if he was dead or alive, and didn't really even care. Only Malic mattered.

“Jackson, call Raph!” I roared, but I heard the shriek then and knew there was no time.

I had seen no traces of a dimensional door until that second. But we all saw the flood of creatures skittering across the floor toward us on their insect-like legs, their bodies all claws and teeth. The witch had brought racer demons with her from the pit, and they would tear us to shreds just by their sheer number.

I saw them come like those ant hordes I watched on the Discovery Channel once, army ants, and they devoured everything in their path. I remembered the demons Emir and Arcan from Joe's father's shop and saw them briefly before they were attacked and consumed by the racers.

And then my stomach lurched and everything started to roll: the air, even the floor, with the strength of the displacement wave Jael was arriving on.

“You have to move back,” Leith said as he gagged and retched, “or we’re dying right now.”

The wave, usually not lethal, would throw off our equilibrium enough that we would be overrun by demons.

“Leith!”

He turned and I grabbed his arm, yanking him down as I rose up.

“Marcus!” he objected.

But I was right: Leith could move Malic, he was the one who could use a wormhole whenever he wanted—he had that strength—and just across the room was enough.

I took my place between him and Jackson. “Together, and don’t stop.”

Ryan was fastest, Jackson was second. I was like Malic, stronger, more brute force than speed, but I had to be the anchor, catching whatever they missed. It was necessary to keep the demons off Leith until Jael came and then away from Jael until he could move Malic. Once they were gone, we could get to the door just like everyone else had and lock them in and close the portal. We just needed to give Jael some time.

“Marcus!”

I couldn’t turn. I only heard, blessedly, my sentinel’s voice behind us.

“I have him! All of you come now!” he commanded.

But he knew there was no way, I knew he did. It was like a wave broke on us, the three of us hacking at a never-ending enemy. The demons that faced us died, but they were replaced in the same second by the next and the next. We had to move back, get out the way we had come in, and close the door. But the longer we stood there, the more I realized it was hopeless. We could inch back, but in the time it would take, we could not keep up the pace. The depths of hell could empty on us there, and eventually we would be overrun and eaten alive. All that could be hoped for was that Leith and Malic and Jael would live.

“Save him!” Ryan screamed, and I heard the tears in his voice, knew he was crying, even as I saw the sword carving up creatures in the corner of my eye.

“Go!” My voice boomed out of me, the pulse again slowing the onslaught for a moment, just enough for Jackson to regain his footing and not go down. We had a moment as the bodies in front of us began to make their own barricade, stacking up, the stench, the blood, the gore making my stomach roll.

“Marot! Jaka! Rindahl! Come to me!”

Jael’s voice called to me, spoke to the primal part of me that was all defender, guardian, warder. But I held my ground because there was no choice.

“Go!” I ordered my sentinel and again felt the rise of nausea as the displacement wave threatened to overwhelm us.

Gathering my strength, I leaped high, taking Ryan and Jackson with me, just enough to lift up over the torrent of creatures flooding the floor and escape the effects of Jael’s removal of Malic and Leith.

“He couldn’t have moved us without being overrun,” I yelled over to my fellow warders. “We saved Leith and Malic.”

“Which is good,” Jackson said before he went limp, dropping like a stone back down toward the demons.

They looked like piranha beneath him, and I knew he was already dead as he plummeted. I had not noticed how much blood he had lost, but I imagined Ryan in that instant, his body shredded, pieces torn away. I could tell, suddenly, by how cold I was that I had to be the same.

“So proud of you,” I managed to yell at Ryan.

But his head was back, and I realized I was cold because I was in the middle of a swirling vortex, the icy wind blasting my skin, the tiny shards of ice flying at me. Ryan, having the same strength as Leith, would take us.

But it was funneling closer and closer, closing, and there was no time. His strength was fading so fast, and I knew, in that second, that all of us could never go. The size, what he could do, was him and one other. He was losing control of it and any second it would snap back like a giant rubber band and suck him, and whoever was closest, through the vortex back to the strongest source of warder power. Back to his hearth. As warders, when we moved it was from one warder to the other, but with lack of consciousness or guidance, the wormhole would empty to the heart of a warder... to their hearth.

Ryan would return to Julian.

Diving, tumbling, I reached Jackson, let go of my swords, turned, wrenched around with all I had left, and *pushed*.

It was like a sonic blast tore through the room. The wormhole reached, spun, crackled through the air, and sucked up Jackson along with Ryan and was gone.

I took a breath, that content one, the one you take when you know everything is going to be all right, and let it out.

Burning hot razors hit me like a wall. I dissolved. The pain was all there was, and then there was no air, no light, nothing.

VI

I FELT the liquid slithering down my throat and opened my eyes. I saw the gold lupine eyes, but I was just too tired to worry about it.

“Warder.”

I rolled my head sideways and saw a man.

“Do you know who I am?”

It was hard to keep my eyes open, but I could see jet black where his eyes should have been. He was an empty vessel, no soul in there at all.

“I’m made, yes?”

My brain, my lawyer brain, never stopped working. So I understood I was looking at a copy of someone else. And if I followed a logical thread, it could only be the missing warder.

“Tarin,” I rasped.

He nodded and gently placed a cloth swollen with liquid on my face. I sucked the fluid from the material, not letting the color or the odor bother me. I couldn’t be made to care. It was wet; that was all I cared about.

“You fell through a hole, warder, and there were lots of those creatures with you.”

Racers. I nodded.

“You’re in pieces,” he told me. “Your face, body—but you don’t need all those things here.”

“Where?” I managed as he moved the cloth, dipped it in a wooden bowl, and let it soak up whatever was in there again.

“The road to Nebo,” he said.

I shook my head. I didn’t know.

“If I can pass through all seven rings, I can ask to be real,” he said, and it was only then I noticed the clothes, the burlap pack, and realized that beside him sat an enormous wolf. “That sentinel, he made me to take Tarin’s place in the world when he locked him up. I was with his hearth, and now I want my own.”

I stared at him.

“The sentinel, he let the demons take me from the hearth, and then the demons threw me away when they saw you and your friends.”

It all seemed logical.

“The water is all you need for now, and there’s a well down the hill. You will have to get to it, because I can’t stay.”

I looked around, and there was nothing but what looked like high grass as far as the eye could see. I was lying beside a fire, small but warm, in a patch that had been burned, maybe. It was a small area.

“You’ve been here, dead, a week, warder.”

A week.

“I can’t wait. I have to go. The wolf says when the hunter comes that I can’t be here.”

He lifted to go, but I reached for him. It took all the strength I had, but I did it.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice broken and full of sand.

“If we cross paths again, you’ll remember this, yes, warder?”

I nodded.

His face was smeared with dirt; his clothes looked sturdy but old. He reminded me of the pictures in the textbooks of the people on the road during the Great Depression. He looked like he belonged to another time, human and in need of help. All except his eyes. His eyes were solid black, no iris, nothing.

“We’re brothers now, warder, yes?”

Again I nodded, giving him my promise.

“The hunter’s coming. I’m sorry to run, but there’s only me and the wolf, and we have far to go. I hope you live, warder.”

I did too.

“I think if you rise from this ring, from Nebo, you’ll die, warder. Just rest, regain your strength, and maybe follow me.” He pointed, and I saw the dirt road that cut through the grass. “If I see you on your feet, you may join us.”

I stared at him, at his eyes.

“The wolf said to kill you, eat you, take our sustenance, but I said no. I will be a man someday, warder. Men don’t eat other men.”

“No.”

He rose then, hand on the wolf’s ruff, and I watched them walk away. They didn’t look back, and when they walked around a small bend, I lost sight of them. The wind, I realized, was slowly rising, making it impossible to hear anything.

I closed my eyes.

The hunter was coming.

Christ.

I just hoped it would be fast. I didn’t... want... to....

Joe.

My body jolted painfully, and I realized that broken did not cover it. I doubted that I could move at all.

I had fallen through a warder void. I must have killed racers on the way down, and so the hole opened and this time instead of me stepping aside to drop a dead demon in, I had been sucked in. But Tarin, the fake warder, the doppelganger, had seen me fall. He and the wolf. They had dragged me away from the racers and put me beside the fire.

A week.

And from one level of hell to the other, time moved differently. There was no way of telling how long I had been there, what I had missed.

From what he said, I was broken, had been dead. Maybe there wasn't enough to look at. Maybe I couldn't pass for human anymore. Maybe Joe couldn't love what was left.

There were no tears; I had nothing to make them with. I could only lay there, limp and lifeless, and wait.

I closed my eyes.

IT WAS dark in a way that I could not see my hand in front of my face, and with the fire gone, it was cold. But I had been colder in a tent in Yosemite. I had been in more pain when I had fought at Jael's side when we cleared a nest of creed demons and a tusk had been driven through my back. I had been more scared when I thought Malic was going to die in my arms. There were worse things, so I concentrated on my own breath. In and out, rise and fall. I just needed to get up. I would either die or I would sit. One or the other would happen. That was just logical. Leith would have been so proud.

THERE was no mistaking the sound of footsteps and as frightened as I was—I didn't want to be devoured, it hadn't been any fun the first time—I was really only focused on how empty my stomach was.

“Marcus!” came the scream, and I could hear the fury in it, the anger, the hopelessness, and the pain.

I could not imagine a better sound.

“Marcus!”

I had to swallow hard, had to get my voice to work, to rise.

The hunter was there.

In the predawn, the gunmetal-colored sky, I saw huge black feathered wings, felt the stirring of the stagnant air, the breeze on my face.

Only a whisper the first time, all I could do.

“Marcus!” he called again in frustration, the sound rising to a shriek, the struggle to hold onto the very last desperate shred of something.

I waited, gathered myself, breathed out, in, and used my voice for the second most important time in my life, the first being when I said *I do* to Joe.

“Raphael!” I called and just for a second I thought he was a fallen angel and so was I.

The darkness was like rain clouds over me, and then they parted, and an enormous black feather was caught between falling and floating before it drifted down, down, and came to rest beside me. And so did he.

Looking up, I found myself swallowed in smoky topaz, glittering and dark. I smiled slowly. “Wings?”

He cleared his throat. “Don’t tell Jackson.”

“I think,” I whispered, “he’d love them.”

He was squinting, working hard not to break down. Big, badass demon hunter, he shouldn’t have cried.

“Can you take me home?”

He nodded as the tears rolled down his cheeks.

I would have reached for him, comforted him, but I had done so much already. I had to rest.

He told me to.

IT FELT like being dropped into the deep end of a pool. I hit, went under, and was swallowed in liquid. When my eyes finally fluttered open, I saw Jael.

“Don’t drown me,” I groaned, knowing instantly where I was.

The bathtub in the castle masquerading as a house that he had in Sausalito, in the master bedroom; it could pass for a small pool. The man had me submerged, and he was purifying the water, pulling God knew what out of me.

I growled.

You would have thought I gave him a million dollars the way he smiled at me, dropped to his knees beside the tub, and put his hands on my face.

“Sonofabitch,” he barked.

I grunted.

“Marot.”

I shook my head at him. Not today.

“Marcus,” he exhaled, hands so gentle on my skin, holding me like I was fragile. “You are an extraordinary man.”

“All”—I coughed to get my voice working—“All warders are.”

He shook his head. “No, Marcus, you have strength that I’ve never seen. There are reserves in you I didn’t know a warder could have. You saved us all: you put us all before yourself, and then you lived on top of it.”

The big question. “How long was I gone?”

“Six months.”

Jesus.

“Everything will be all right,” he promised, which was not even logical.

“Joe,” I said.

“Joe is well, we check on him.”

“You don’t see him?”

“He doesn’t want to see us. It’s been very painful for him. He knows you’re alive because the house is still sealed, the branding touch hasn’t left him, but the not knowing....”

That would have been hardest for Joe, the uncertainty and the fact that I had put others before him. Because I could have reached him, could have been safe, could have left and gotten home. But I had placed Malic before him. Jackson and Leith before him. Ryan. How could I ever say that he was all there was... when he had not been.

“Did you tell him you found me?”

“No, I wanted you to tell him when you were ready. Or I can go get him right—”

“I’m disfigured, right?”

He frowned.

“Just tell me.”

“No, but why would that matter? Joe loves the man, not the wrapping.”

“You think just because Joe’s blind that he doesn’t care what I feel like when he touches me?”

His smile was warm as he rose and left the room. He returned with a hand-held mirror, and when he turned it on me, without warning, I realized instantly that I was looking at my own face.

I looked like me. My wide-set dark brown eyes, and my long, straight nose, full lips, high cheekbones, and thick eyebrows were familiar, and it was a relief. I could look down at my own body and see the gouges, the scars, the tears, and the bruises. It would take time, but I would be perfect before I laid eyes on Joseph Locke again.

“We should call him now, Marcus.”

I shook my head. I didn’t even have the strength to protect him. What use was I to him?

“You’re wrong,” was all Jael said.

But I didn’t want to fight. My life had to wait until I was ready.

VII

I TALKED to Jael, but I wasn't ready to see anyone else. Even Raphael, who I had already seen, I didn't want to visit me again.

Jael and I walked his property with his Irish wolfhounds, and after two weeks I could throw a stick for the dogs, and after one more I could run with them. Food, water, exercise—it took time, but I built back up.

Malic had done an amazing thing and gone to Helene Kessler and told her that I needed an extended leave of absence. When she had asked for particulars, he told her only that I was missing. Would she accept that? Apparently she had. He would update her when he knew anything. There was nothing she could do. All the appropriate authorities had been contacted, and that was all. Her willingness to take his word and wait had impressed him, Jael told me. Helene Kessler, Jael thought, could handle the truth when I was ready. She already had faith in me; he felt that was an excellent foundation to build on. She was quite a woman, quite a human being, period. I was betting on her being able to handle the truth.

The demon base in Lexington, Breka's home, and everything that happened that night had been covered up under the umbrella of a gas leak and everyone had bought it. What else could it have possibly been?

Jael spent time catching me up, and it seemed odd, but his company, though not welcome, was all I could seem to accept. Just the thought of talking about it all made me not want to see anyone. And Joe, especially, what could I say about my weakness, my inability to get back to him? What rationale could I give? I was supposed to protect him and his family, and I had instead disappeared, not been there. The failure was great.

"You're insane, you know," Jael told me as I stood on the back deck of his guesthouse, staring out at the bay. "If you just let them, they would all tell you what you did."

“But I just want it to all go away,” I said, breathing in the warm summer air. It was August now and I had left them all before Christmas. I had been gone six months and had been holed up at Jael’s for another two. It was so strange.

“Can you return, Marcus? Would you prefer to start over somewhere else? Go where no one knows you? I’m sure it would be easy to do at work, and I can recommend you to another sentinel.”

Start over.

“Maybe,” I exhaled, finally faced with the reality.

“But Joe,” Jael said softly.

I had to see him. “If he’s waiting, I’ll see.”

“You don’t throw away six years, Marcus.” He didn’t understand. “Explain what you’re thinking.”

“What happened to Deidre?” I asked suddenly, desperate to change the subject.

“Nothing happened; she was here three months ago. It’s my turn to visit her next.”

“She’s not going to move here?”

He cleared his throat. “She’s not ready to give up being a sentinel, and neither am I. It was boorish of me to think that because she’s a woman that it would be her sacrifice to make.”

I studied his face. “So quit and go to her.”

“You say the same idiotic things as Jaka. One doesn’t just leave.”

“I think one does,” I smiled, sighing. “If you love her.”

“Love is complicated, isn’t it?” He had brought me right back around to my problem. It was clever. “Talk to me.”

“Just—”

“Marcus—”

“You know, that’s weird already,” I cut him off. “Coming from you, it’s.... Just go back to Marot.”

“Fine, Marot.” He took a breath. “I want to hear what you’re thinking.”

“About what?”

“About Joe!” I could hear the frustration in his voice. “Please.”

“I just... why would he want me anymore? I’m supposed to protect him, and I didn’t, and he’s supposed to be my whole life and then what—I just forgot him? What he means? He must hate me. I would hate me if I were him.”

“Mar—”

“Just thinking about how he’s going to look at me.... Why have that scene? Why not just spare us both?”

“You’re scared.”

“It’s more than that.” Simple fear would not have kept me from my hearth.

“You’re resigned.”

It was closer to the truth, probably a little of both. “I.... Jael?”

He looked strange, lost in thought, a million miles away.

“You okay?”

And I watched the light sort of turn on in his eyes. “I’m an idiot.”

“Jael,” I began. “You can’t fix—”

“To your mind,” he cut me off, “you were on that alternate plane a week but to your body and soul, the wear on both, the pain.... It was six months. And now you’ve been back two, and.... God, I’m really just so stupid.” He turned away from me, charging into the other room, and slamming the door behind him.

I had no clue what was going on, so I left.

THE five-mile run up and down the hills of Sausalito felt good. My body would never be the same, there were scars in hard-to-reach places, but I was strong again, and I could feel my muscles respond when I asked.

When I got back, I took a long hot shower and had changed into basketball shorts and nothing else when I wandered into Jael’s kitchen for dinner.

“How dare you,” the cold, flat voice said.

My head snapped sideways, and I saw Joe standing by the dishwasher next to the sink. He didn’t look like himself, and I wasn’t sure why, and then it came to me. I had never seen the expression he had on his face before in my life.

I waited.

He trembled just slightly, and I restrained myself, stamped down the urge to go to him.

“Marcus Roth, explain yourself right fucking now.”

He looked thin, his coloring was off, and his hair was shorter. He was wearing thick black-framed Buddy Holly glasses with yellow lenses that made the blue of his eyes a strange lime green. It was odd.

“Marcus!” he barked.

I cleared my throat, holding onto the back of one of Jael’s barstools for dear life. It was easier to articulate as I had said it earlier to my sentinel. I wondered briefly if that had been the point. “When push came to shove, I didn’t think of you. You weren’t right there. The guys were there, and so I put them first. I sacrificed myself, and in so doing put you in jeopardy. I’m so sorry, Joe.” My voice bottomed out. “I let you down like I said I never would. I’m so sorry.”

He nodded, and I saw the clench of his jaw, heard him take a breath, saw the shiver run though his body.

“So you think that you’ve let me down.”

I nodded.

“Use your words, Marcus.”

“Yes,” I managed to get out, feeling my knees go weak, my power deserting me when I needed it most.

I did not expect the plate—and this was Jael’s house, so who knew what the damn thing cost—to narrowly miss me and shatter into a thousand pieces behind me.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“You stupid ass!” he screamed as he began emptying the cupboard above him. The plates flew toward me, and I had no idea how, but he knew where I was, and he had great aim.

“Joseph.” I tried to calm him, tried to get closer at the same time.

“You idiot! This hurt me! You not coming for me the second you got home! You not sending for me the minute you could—that is fuckin’ killing me, not the rest of this self-serving martyr bullshit!”

Martyr? “Now wait!” I yelled, and then I saw that the plates were gone, and he moved to the next cupboard full of glassware.

“How dare you not send for me!”

“Shit,” I growled, coming around the island even as he retreated.

“Stay the fuck away from me!”

And it hit me—all the pain, all the longing, all my need, all of it. My hearth. I couldn’t breathe without him.

“Joe,” I gasped.

“No!” he roared, walking backward.

“I need you.”

But he was furious, and hot, angry tears were running down his cheeks as he unloaded on me, screaming, yelling, and calling me every name he could think of. Mostly I was a bastard. Over and over.

“Baby,” I soothed.

“Fuck you!” he railed. “You did what you had to do, Marcus! You didn’t just save me and my family, you saved Malic and Jacks and Ry and Leith and all the hearths too. We don’t work without our warders; do you even fucking get that? You did it all, Marcus, and then you’re gonna do what, punish us all, stay away from all of us—leave us?”

I inched closer to him.

“Fuck you, Marcus Roth! I fuckin’ hate you, and I’m gonna leave you like you left me, and I hope you cry yourself to sleep every night like I did and miss my smell on your sheets and my hands on your skin and just fucking rot!”

The crystal punch bowl missed me by inches. The matching ladle bounced off the copper pots hanging from the ceiling, but because he’d really flung

it, put his back into it, he upset his balance just a little.

It was enough.

I moved fast, faster than he could or would ever be able to, reached him, and wrapped the man up tight in my arms.

“No,” he screamed.

I held on, squeezed tighter, and the flood of relief was overwhelming. All of it, everything was just done. Nothing mattered; I had Joseph Locke in my arms.

“I hate you, Marcus,” he sobbed, face pressed to my collarbone, hands flat on my bare chest. “I’m gonna leave you.”

I sighed as I rubbed my chin in his hair. It was so soft, his thick auburn hair, and it smelled so clean. He was shaking so hard, pressing into me so close, struggling now to free his arms.

“I thought you’d hate me, and I couldn’t bear to see that on your face.”

“I’d never hate you for doing what was right, Marcus,” he said, his voice nasally, stuffed up, full of tears. “I never once thought you made a decision, them over me. It never occurred to me that saving them would keep you from me. You forgot who I am; you forgot that I understand every part of you, your heart especially.”

I had been so lost, and the epiphany took me literally to my knees.

“Marcus!”

He was dragged to the floor with me, and I was kneeling with him, still holding on tight, tucked against my chest.

“Forgive me,” I begged. “Please, baby, forgive me. I’m so stupid. I was so wrong. I thought.... I didn’t give you credit for being the man you are, for knowing what you know, for loving me like you do.”

“I don’t love you anymore,” he told me, wrenching free, scrambling away, and turning to look for a door, any door.

It was the back deck, which, if he got out, would strand him there as there were no stairs down. Jael lived on a cliff.

I didn’t mention that he was walking out onto the lanai. It was too dear. Instead I slammed the door shut before he could get it open further, held it closed, my hand braced beside his head.

“Put your hands on me.”

“You threw me away.” His voice shook because crying and talking was hard to do.

“I was terrified of what you’d do, and that was stupid,” I told him, my voice low and husky, coaxing, seductive. “I’m so sorry, baby.”

His teeth were chattering with the welling emotion, and the trembling was obvious.

“Please, Joey,” I begged. “How long have you waited?”

“Waited for what?”

“To put your hands on me?”

His breath stuttered, caught.

“I’m right here,” I whispered, leaning forward, my forehead pressed to his. “Joe.”

“I hate you.”

“I know. Put your hands on me,” I ordered, my voice hardening.

“How could you do that to me? Leave me?”

I would go out of my mind if he didn't touch me, if he didn't need to anymore.

“Me? You’re supposed to love me.”

“You have to forgive me. You just have to.”

“Marcus,” he whispered.

“This will kill me when nothing else did.”

He gasped as he slid his hands up my abdomen, his fingers sliding over muscles, exploring new scars, touching me everywhere, mapping new terrain and old. His hands were so sensitive, his fingertips, his palms, and I watched his lips part with the sensation.

“Promise it’s okay,” I pressed him. “Swear we’re still us. Joey, I’m so sorry. I can’t be more sorry. Please.”

The whimper, the sweetest sound I ever heard, let me know I had him.

“Your skin is like warm silk, Marcus, smooth and made to be touched. And I know you, you’re worried what I’ll think of these scars,” he said as he bent and kissed one, tracing the next with his tongue, then following with his teeth.

My cock hardened so fast it hurt, swelling with blood, with my need for him. “Fuck, Joe.”

“I love these marks. I love every single part of you, Marcus Roth, always.”

I took his face in my hands, tilted his chin up, and took the glasses off, dropping them onto the kitchen counter. Here were the eyes I knew, welled now with tears, red-rimmed, full of hurt. I swallowed hard.

“Swear on my life right this second. Promise and I’ll believe you.”

“What?” I asked, even though I knew.

“That you will never, ever, stay away from me again,” he said his breath warm on my face. “If you can, if you’re able, you come home to me.”

I nodded furiously so I didn’t break down.

His smile was breathtaking. “Use your words, Marcus.”

But there was no way. I ground my mouth down over his instead, kissed him ravenously, my tongue pushing inside, claiming what was mine, what I had to have.

His arms wrapped around my neck as he whined in the back of his throat, pushing against me, rubbing, toeing off his black Chuck Taylors at the same time.

He hung onto me, kissing me back just as passionately even as my hands flew over him, unbuckling his belt, working his zipper, rough as I disrobed him, wanting him naked as fast as I could get him that way.

When his jeans and briefs were gone, when there was only bare ass under my hands, I wrapped an arm around his waist, lifted him up, and pulled and yanked at the clothes bunched around his ankles. I left them in a pile in the middle of the broken glass in the kitchen.

His legs were tight around my hips as I walked him to my bedroom. He lifted his lips from mine to gulp air and then reclaimed my mouth with first a bite before the sucking, devouring kissing began all over again.

Our tongues slid together, over and under, around, and he wanted deeper, more, and when I fell over him, down onto the bed, pinning him under me, his arms tightened around my neck so I couldn’t pull away.

He wanted me that close, and I understood. Any farther away was too much. At home we.... But we weren’t at home.

I pulled back, and he lifted up to recapture my mouth, but I moved out of his reach.

“Marcus!”

I tried not to smile. “Lube.”

“What?”

I was so glad he couldn’t see my grin. “Um, we don’t have any lube, Joey.”

“Are you *kidding*?”

He was indignant, and I put my head down on his shoulder and laughed. And it felt so good. I felt so much like me I was giddy.

He shoved me off the bed, and I couldn’t stop laughing. When he pulled the comforter off the bed, wrapped himself in it and stomped out of the room, the tears were rolling down my cheeks. The ridiculousness of it, passion done in by lack of Astroglide or any other slippery substance, was hysterical... and normal.

I was okay.

Joe was okay.

We would be us again.

I was laying there, sprawled out, still chuckling when he came back, chucked a small tube at me, and then slammed the door.

“Where did you get this?” I asked, smiling crazily at how annoyed he looked, how his hair was sticking up, how red and swollen his lips were and how flushed his skin was.

“From my backpack!”

“Carrying lube around, are you?” I asked even as I saw it was brand new, the seal unbroken.

“Shut up, Marcus,” he said, dropping the comforter and walking over to me.

He reached for my hand, and I lifted mine toward him, the action so engrained, so ordinary, and when my fingers curled around his, I felt it in

my heart.

“I was stupid,” I said as I guided him down to me, on top of me, straddling my hips.

“Yes.”

I let go of his hand as I pulled down my shorts and briefs, letting my hard cock bounce free, letting Joe reach behind him and ease the clothes down to my ankles.

My shaft loomed between us as he fisted it in his hand.

It felt incredible.

“Pass me the lube.”

I placed it in his hand, riveted, watching as he opened it, squeezed a glob into his palm, and then used that to slick my hard, rigid, leaking cock.

“There’s no way I’ll last longer than a second,” I confessed. “I’ve got zero stamina. You’re gonna have to settle for a blowjob, baby, ’cause—”

“No,” he told me, lifting up, leaning forward, again reaching behind him, this time for my dick.

“Joe.” I stopped him, grabbing him tight. “You’re not ready. You need to—”

“I’ve been ready for ages; I’ve been waiting for you to come home to me.”

“Baby—”

“Marcus, I’ve been working my own ass for almost a year waiting to be stuffed full of you again! You should see the fucking dildo I have at home!”

“You’ve been fucking yourself, thinking of me?” God, that was hot.

“Every single time, yeah.”

My breath became shallow with how bad I wanted to be buried inside of him.

“And now you think I’m gonna wait? Are you insane? All I wanna do is ride you.”

I let him go, because really, Joe knew his own mind, knew his body better, and absolutely understood his own limits. It was one of the many reasons I was enthralled with him.

When I felt the head of my cock at his entrance, I gritted my teeth and held on. I would make it if it killed me.

It nearly did.

He was so tight, and he was easing me inside him so slowly, inch by inch, his muscles clenched and unyielding against the persistent pressure. He felt so good, the silky rippling walls, and then he dropped down onto me, impaled.

“Joe!”

“Oh God.” His body twitched, and I was squeezed in a vise of wet heat.

“Did I hurt—”

“Ohmygod,” he moaned, lifting up only to slide back down my slippery length, seating himself deeper, harder.

“Joseph,” I managed to get out.

He rose again only to lower himself back down, rise and fall, riding me, chanting my name, begging me to touch him.

I wrapped his dripping cock with my hand and stroked him from balls to head, holding tight like I knew he liked, my lube-slicked fingers gliding over his velvet skin.

“Marcus, I need you to fuck me, I need to feel you deep. I need to know you’re home because it hurts to fuckin’ sit down.”

I would never do that, never be that rough, but as I slid slowly free of him and rolled over, pinning him to the floor under me, yanking his legs up and folding them in half, I realized that I wanted to.

“For once, just use me up, Marcus. Just forget yourself.”

But my control....

“Let go, Marcus. Have faith. Trust me. I deserve it. I’ve earned it.”

I bent down into the open-mouthed kiss, sucked on his tongue, getting the last taste of submission before I leaned back and lined my cock up with his pink puckered hole. I sheathed myself to the hilt in one long, smooth stroke.

Joe yelled my name, and I understood from the sound, the bliss that infused it, that he needed me right where I was, hammering into him, driving deep and hard and fast.

My hands would leave marks where I was holding his hips. Watching him jerk himself off was putting me right over the edge.

“Joey, gonna come.”

His moan, the way his inner walls clasped around me, bearing down, let me know that his release was imminent.

I rammed home, buried to the balls in his ass, feeling his heartbeat and mine together, the throbbing, sizzling heat rolling through me without warning. I came so hard, pumping hot come deep inside my lover, frozen over him, holding tight and making sure he couldn’t move.

After long minutes, I finally let his legs unfold from where I had them trapped against me, and he slid them over my arms, resting them, allowing blood flow to commence.

I was panting, covered in sweat, utterly spent, ready to drop down onto him at any second.

“Get in the bed.”

I whined.

“Get in the bed now.”

“Don’t want to pull out.”

“Now.”

I eased carefully from his still-clenching hole and climbed up onto the bed and dropped down like a rock on my belly, my head on the pillow.

“Shit, you need help?” I asked.

But he answered with his skin sliding over mine, lying down, his weight of no consequence to me.

“You going to sleep on top of me?”

“Yeah.”

His wet, flaccid cock was pressed to the small of my back, and I could feel his cheek resting between my shoulder blades.

“Okay.”

“I wish I could see you, Marcus, just once. Everyone tells me that you’re a stunning man, but all I know is that touching you is different from touching any other.”

I purred under him. I couldn’t help it.

“Your skin is always warm and sleek, and your body is so hard and strong. I love touching your muscles, feeling them move under my palm. I love holding your cock in my hand and feeling your body vibrate with power. I

love your soft mouth and your big hands and how you grab me and tug on my hair and hold me down. Your weight on me, always, is like home.”

God, I loved him.

“So please, please don’t ever leave me again. I can live without you. I know that now. I can. I just don’t want to.”

I wanted to roll over, but he pressed me down, and I was weary and so ready to sleep. I could finally, completely rest. I had Joe in bed with me.

“Stay with me.”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“Never leave me.”

“No,” I promised.

“I love you so much, Marcus, never wanna sleep without you again for the rest of my life.”

Amen.

VIII

THE next morning the kitchen was already cleaned up when I walked in to take care of it. Jael was having coffee.

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s to be expected. Reconciliation is messy.”

I had to agree.

I promised my sentinel that I would replace all the dishes (simple), and the punchbowl (harder, as it had to be ordered online from some place in Glasgow), and he smiled and nodded and said it was fine. When his hand went to my face, cupping my cheek, I grumbled that he had been right.

“Of course,” he said, like I was an idiot. “I always am.”

I made omelets and served Joe breakfast in bed. Before I could take the dishes back to the sink, the kiss I got sent a wave of heat through me. I had the man pinned under me seconds later. When he arched up to meet me, I forgot about everything else.

My stomach growling brought me from the bedroom hours later, and Jael suggested that instead of eating, I shower and change.

“Why?”

“They’re coming.”

“Who’s coming?” I asked.

“Who do you think?”

And even though I had wanted to simply go home with Joe, see it, stretch out on my California king, and watch him make dinner, I understood. It was time.

Malic got there first. I would have been disappointed if he hadn't. Your best friend should always be the first one through the door.

I was standing on the back deck; Joe was stretched out on the chaise sipping a mojito, which I had teased him about.

“Since when do you drink before lunch?”

“Since you went away.”

I rolled my eyes because I knew he had years of rubbing it in my face.

“Marcus.”

I turned, and Malic was standing there staring at me, eyes clouded like they never were, holding onto the doorjamb, jaw clenched, the muscles in his neck corded.

“Marcus,” Joe prodded quietly. “He could die from you not calling to him.”

But Malic and I didn't do words. They weren't necessary. I nodded, and he breathed, and I saw him straighten, ready to walk to the railing, and I knew that this time, it wasn't enough.

I lifted my hand, and he moved very fast. Normally, just us, no life and death situation imminent, there was no need for such a display of speed. But one second we were apart, the next second he was on me, one arm over my shoulder, the other under my arm, hugging me the way I normally only held Joe, so close I could feel his heart beating. His face was pressed into the side of my neck, and he inhaled me, breathing me in, making his body understand that I was safe so his brain could process it.

“Don't stay away again,” he mumbled against my skin.

“No,” I promised. Not him. The others I could never swear to, but him I could, him I had to. He was my brother.

I felt the final clench, and then he pulled away the same instant I let him go.

“All good now?” Joe asked snidely. “All hugged out?”

I laughed when Malic lunged at Joe, attacking him, and my boyfriend yelled for the big gorilla to get the hell off him. I was still smiling as Ryan and Julian, Jackson and Raphael, and Leith and Simon came through the door. Dylan came last, followed by Jael.

I took a breath and Ryan ran. I didn’t expect the leap, arms and legs wrapped around me, the kiss on my cheek, my jaw, and the hug with the shivering.

“Sorry,” I apologized, realizing that I had been an idiot a moment ago. I loved them all, and they were all my brothers. Malic and I were more, but that did not diminish what I felt for the others. “Forgive me.”

“You saved my life; you protected me. What the fuck is there to forgive?”

When I let him go, he slid down my body, and I had Julian there to fill my arms. The mantra of the *thank you* began.

Leith and I hugged briefly, but it was hard, and his whispered words were fervent and sincere. The kiss, his lips feather-light on my own for just a moment, was unexpected.

I was out of my depth. How had I missed that they all loved me?

Simon smiled, and the dark charcoal eyes glowed quicksilver before he leaned in to hug me.

“Don’t you know, Marcus? You’re the guy that holds everything together. Without you, they’re just fighters. With you, they’re a family.”

But there was no way.

Jackson was taller than Ryan, but I was still bigger than he was, so I was again engulfed, arms and legs, and I apologized to Raphael for putting my hands on him as I held him to me.

“It’s okay.” Raphael smiled dangerously, his possessiveness tempered just for a minute.

Jackson kissed me and hugged me, and I got my hands in his hair and pushed it back from his face. I had grown accustomed to the beard and mustache.

“Can we sit and talk about what happened now? Please?”

We could.

Raphael came close after I put Jackson down, after he could bear to be near me as my hands were no longer on his man. We were all the same. We were protective, kind, strong—until you tried to take something from us. Then you saw the scary, primitive warder. I never liked anyone to see that side of me, the side that could be cruel and merciless. For a kyrie, the distinction between angel and devil was even thinner. So as I saw the flicker of rage rise and dissipate just as fast, I said a quick prayer for the man stupid enough to ever try and take Jackson Tybalt from the creature who loved him.

As I looked over the men who inhabited my life with me, I realized that Malic was looking away. Following his gaze across the deck, I saw Dylan leaning on the railing, contemplating the setting sun.

He was purposely standing apart.

I looked back at Malic, and he shook his head. He wanted me to not worry about it, whatever *it* was.

But how could I, after everything?

Taking a breath, I walked over toward Dylan. His eyes flicked to mine, and the second I saw the anger, I understood. Joe had looked much the same way. My hearth had been mad at me. Dylan was mad *because* of me.

I stopped close enough so he had to tip his head up to look at me. It was a lawyer tactic that I realized I used subconsciously to give me the upper

hand. “You don’t love me anymore?” I teased, thinking it was safest. He was just a baby after all.

He sucked in a breath.

“Can I guess?”

His brown eyes were so big and so pained, vulnerable.

“I hurt your man.”

He tried so hard, but the tears were inevitable.

“I’m sorry, Dylan. I had to deal with things myself, and—”

“No.” He shook his head.

“No?”

He cleared his throat and reached out to put a hand on my chest. “Marcus, you’re the guy that holds it all together,” he said softly. “You don’t get to be alone. You don’t get to run away or decide to go on a vision quest or something.”

“Dylan—”

“I thought it was Jael, you know? I thought he was like the father and you guys all thought of him like that, but no one does but Jacks. Everybody else, he’s like a big brother and a boss rolled into one.”

I stayed quiet because he had a point to make, and it was obviously eating him up, so he had to get it out. Peripherally I was aware that the others were closing in on us, but I was focused on my friend’s hearth more than anything.

“But you, Marcus....” He took a breath, “I didn’t know who you were until you weren’t here anymore.”

A second hand joined the first, and then both hands slid down my sides to my hips, holding on.

“When you were gone, it was like Malic lost his family. I asked him how Ryan was, and he didn’t know. I asked about Leith and got the same answer. We tried to come here and visit Jael, all of us, but no one could talk. Ryan killed that witch, you know? He—”

“I know.” I smiled, turning my head to look back at Ryan. “That was amazing.”

His eyes sparked, and I realized that I was the only one who saw it, because everybody else was looking at me instead of Ryan Dean.

“I was dead if you hadn’t taken her head off, Ry,” I told him. “I knew you were fast, but I had no idea.”

He nodded, and it was obvious that the man was overwhelmed.

“Jael,” I told him. “You would have been amazed.”

“I’m sure I would have.”

“And Malic.” I exhaled. “There was no way Ryan would be alive if you hadn’t taken that blow for him. Jesus, man, you scared me to death.”

He was staring at me so hard, as though he was memorizing my face.

“And you held the line even though you were shredded, Jacks.” I smiled at him. “When you fell... I think my heart stopped.”

His dark eyes were locked on me.

“I just thought, at least Leith is safe, and Jael and Malic. It sustained me, and I think Jacks and Ry too.”

No one said a word, and after a moment I became aware that all eyes were on me.

“Marcus.”

I turned back to Dylan.

“This”—he gestured at all of us—“does not work without you. I didn’t know. I didn’t understand, but I do now.”

“We’re all in this together, all of us, warders and hearths, and we’re a family, yeah?” I asked.

“We are now.” He took a quivering breath. “Because you’re home.”

I took his face in my hands as he broke down into tears.

“Goddammit,” Malic growled as he came toward us. “Why you gotta go all soft and mushy on him?”

I chuckled, grabbing Dylan, crushing him against me, hoping to squeeze all the tears out in one shot.

“You’re suffocating him,” Simon laughed.

“He’s loving it,” Julian sighed, “so it’s okay.”

“Can we drink now?” Leith whined.

I let Dylan go, released him into Malic’s arms, but even as my friend took his small, young hearth close, he put a hand on the back of my neck and squeezed gently.

“I know,” I told him.

“Just fuckin’ stay.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Don’t leave us,” he muttered under his breath. “Me.”

And I understood, for us, for warders who had lost their whole families, a hearth was all they had. But for a few clutches, a lucky few, there was even more created. There was a family.

“Who’s hungry?” Jael asked.

And since we all were, he started barking out orders. I was thrilled to have the spotlight off me as I sank down beside Joe on the chaise.

He smirked at me. “So what did we learn?”

I groaned.

“Maybe, jackass, you should think a little more of yourself and realize that in the big picture, Marcus Roth, you’re fucking vital.”

I leaned sideways and put my head down in his lap.

“I’m not petting you.”

“Please, Joe,” I whined, closing my eyes.

His hand slid down between my shoulder blades, and he rubbed gently, caressing, finally bending to kiss my temple.

“Say it.”

“I love you, Marcus.”

Always good to hear.

AS WE all scarfed down steaks and corn on the cob and potatoes wrapped in foil, all cooked on the grill, I was filled in on events.

“Raph went and found the doppelganger,” Jackson told me. “You told him that he helped you, so we wanted to see if we could help him.”

I looked at Raphael. “And?”

“He and his wolf are on the road, and I gave him a way to contact me if he needed. I told him that your debt became mine because while I can travel the rings, Marcus, you should not.”

“Why?”

“Your energy, more than any other warder I’ve ever known, is tangible and traceable. You don’t want something to follow you home.”

“No,” I agreed.

“I followed you home,” Joe snapped, and I realized, as I had an hour ago, that he was really drunk. The ratio of food to alcohol in his system was way off. We had missed lunch, and whereas I had waited to drink, Joe had started before anyone even arrived.

“That was a good thing,” I teased him, leaning sideways, kissing his cheek. “Now be a good boy and eat your potatoes.”

He grunted. “Did you all know that Marcus is criss-crossed with new marks from fighting those racer demons?”

Dead silence at the table. It was guilt that no one needed.

“So,” I said brightly. “You sure do track quickly, Raph. How do you do that?”

All eyes on the kyrie.

He glared at me.

I smiled back.

He growled. “You promised.”

“I didn’t mean to promise.”

He was disgusted with me; that was clear.

“What’s going on?” Jackson asked us.

I leaned forward to deliver the news.

Raphael took Jackson’s hand instead. The solemn look on his face, the trepidation in his eyes—both, I knew, were so unnecessary.

“I have wings when I’m in other dimensions.”

“What?”

“He has these huge black feather wings,” I told Jackson who turned to look at me. “They’re beautiful, you should see them.”

He looked back at Raphael. “You have wings?”

The kyrie nodded slowly.

“That’s so cool.”

Instant surprise.

“What?”

“I thought you would think it made me more demon than human and—”

“No,” Jackson cut him off, leaning over to press a kiss to the side of Raphael’s neck. “I can’t wait to see them, and you should never be afraid to tell me anything.”

“That’s how you found the edge of that dimension I was in,” Simon said excitedly. “You had a lot of ground to cover in every direction, and you did it so fast.... I wish you would have let me see them while we were there.”

“We were inside,” Raphael said softly, and I realized that he was more than a little touched by the reception over this latest development. “No need to fly in there.”

“Yeah, but still.” Simon smiled warmly. “I bet they’re amazing.”

“They are,” I assured him, looking over at Jackson. “Raphael saved my life.”

Jackson nodded.

“And you saved Jackson’s,” Raphael told me. “We’re even.”

Another looming silence seemed inevitable.

“So Shane’s not dead,” Ryan chimed in. “We found him walking down the side of the road the next day. The witch had wiped his mind, but otherwise he’s well.”

“The spell didn’t lift when she died?”

“It did after a month.” Ryan smiled, so obviously happy just to be looking at me. “He’s with Kyle and the other two warders and their sentinel in Rome being... what?” His head turned to Jael. “Educated? Tortured? What?”

Jael sighed deeply. “Tortured? Really? This is what you think of the labarum?”

Ryan shrugged. “Pretty much, yeah.”

“The council is not in the habit of hurting their own warders,” Jael told him. “They are all being retrained in their duties. The sentinel has been stripped of his rank and is now a warder again. He will be assigned to a new city.”

“That sucks,” Dylan said. “I bet he has his whole life in Lexington, and now he’s gotta move because he was stupid.”

“Very stupid,” Leith agreed. “But you don’t let an incarnation sleep with the hearth of a warder. If you ask me, reassigned isn’t enough.”

“So what happened to the real Tanner and his wife?”

“They were reunited in Rome,” Jackson said. “And he’s been stripped of his warder status and his power.”

“How?”

“The sentinel,” Jael answered.

All eyes went to him; we were all interested in this part.

“A sentinel calls for a warder and a man or woman answers that summons. At the same time, the power within the warder is awakened by the sentinel. The presence of the sentinel speaks to the dormant power in the individual. The sentinel sparks the gift, and a warder is created.”

Malic squinted at him. “I don’t remember it being that romantic.”

Dylan found that statement hysterical. Julian pushed his face down into the table, which just made Dylan laugh louder.

“But the sentinel can remove their ‘recognition’, I guess you’d call it, and it’s as though the warder was never *seen* in the first place, never discovered, never made.”

“Okay,” I nodded. “So Tanner and his wife are free to be regular people.”

“Yes.”

“But after being a warder, won’t that drive him nuts?” Julian asked. “Once you’ve been something extraordinary, it would be hard to go back to being a normal person.”

“Which is why Lexington’s new sentinel will keep an eye on Tanner and his wife,” Jael instructed us all. “And the labarum council is very pleased with

all of you for uncovering corruption in another territory. You're to be commended.”

“Lucky everyone lived, then, to be commended,” Joe said sarcastically.

“I’m glad Tanner and his wife are back together,” I told Jael.

“They’re getting a divorce.” Joe cackled evilly. “She doesn’t want a *regular* man; she only wants a warder. She’s like the blonde bitch in *An Officer and a Gentleman*. She wants to marry a pilot, she doesn’t want an enlisted man, she just wants to see the world.... The guy working at the grocery store ain’t cuttin’ it, you know?”

Everyone was looking at me.

I turned to look at Joe. “Baby, maybe you should eat something, huh?”

“I’m not hungry, Marcus. Thank you.”

“At least,” Malic began, picking the conversation back up, “when the new sentinel takes over, he doesn’t have to worry about Arcan or Emir or any of those other demons. All of them are dead, and the portal between Breka’s club and the hell dimension is closed.”

“And we burned the house down for good measure,” Ryan said.

“There’s nothing left,” Leith added. “We razed it.”

“You enjoyed saying that,” Simon teased. “Very barbarian of you, the pillaging.”

“I do have that in me,” Leith said playfully. “Right, baby?”

Simon leaned forward and kissed him lightly, then sat back and looked at me. “Joe told us that his family is well.”

“Yeah.” I smiled. “Joe told me that, too, and I got to talk to all of them on the phone this morning. It was good.”

“Hey, Jael, could you strip Marcus’s power from him? I’d love him to be just a partner at a law firm and nothing else.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Don’t patronize me, Marcus,” Joe snapped, draining his third mojito, jiggling the ice in the glass, and then loudly slurping the last of it.

“So I guess tomorrow I gotta go see my boss and see if she’ll take me back.” I tried to ignore Joe. “You gotta tell me exactly what you told her, Mal.”

“I need another one of these,” Joe said. “Or maybe just a gin and tonic. Whatever.”

“Start from the beginning,” I told Malic, prodding him as I reached for Joe.

My heart tried to pull free when I took gentle hold of his wrist, but I was insistent, and so when I eased him sideways, into my lap, he moved of his own volition.

“Nobody cares that you could’ve died,” he whispered under his breath. “So Dylan’s upset because you hurt Malic’s feelings, so the fuck what? I give a shit.”

When he finished, his voice had risen and again, there was a silence.

“Why’re you mad?” I asked, stroking his hair, kissing one of his beautifully arched brows.

“You could have died,” he repeated.

“But I didn’t, and I’m right here.”

I felt his deep breath move through his whole body and calm him. When I looked over at Malic, he smiled at me.

“Your boss, Helene, I really like her.”

“Yeah, me too,” I agreed, appreciating the fact that he had simply changed the subject without making Joe own up to how he was feeling in front of everyone.

“I know your assistant and the associates that work for you will be thrilled to get you back too. It’s Lolita, right?”

I sighed. “Yeah, Lolita. I miss her.”

“Well, she misses you too. I saw her at the park not too long ago, and she grilled me about you. They have her working with—” He thought a second. “Douche-man?”

“Dutchman,” I chuckled. “She just calls him Douche-man.”

“Well, apparently the second you get back, she gets released, and I quote, ‘from the idiot box’, and will be allowed to return to sitting where she belongs at the desk outside your office.”

I smiled wide. “Okay, I better get my ass over there first thing tomorrow morning then.”

“No,” Joe barked loudly. “Tomorrow you’re gonna spend the day home with me, just the two of us. That’s what I want.”

“Okay.” I hugged him tight, loving the way he turned in my lap, arms around my neck, holding on tight. “Whatever you want.”

He sighed loudly as I nuzzled my face into his hair, and I felt everyone around me take a breath and calm.

“What are you doing?” I heard Malic say.

“Joe’s in Marcus’s lap. I wanna sit in yours,” Dylan replied matter-of-factly. “Just ’cause he’s drunk off his ass doesn’t count.”

At which point Joe snorted out an indignant hiccupping laugh, hugged me tight, and turned around to face the others.

“Sorry,” he sighed.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” Ryan said.

And it was the truth.

IX

I WASN'T sure what to do—call or simply show up—so a day later, as Joe had requested, I went with just showing up at my office because I had always been the guy who dove into the deep end. It was really the only way to be. So, swaddled up in Armani, I rode the elevator up to the twenty-fifth floor but could get no further than the double glass doors. A woman I had never met before leaned out ten minutes later.

“Hi.” She smiled wide, looking me over with an appraising eye. “You must be Marcus Roth.”

I cleared my throat. “How do you know?”

“My boss said that if a tall, handsome man should get to the front doors and not come in, but just pace outside, I should call her right away. I’m thinking it’s you.”

It was time to breathe, so I tried. “It’s me. Who are you?”

“Suzie, Suzie Jones.”

“Nice to meet you, Suzie Jones.” I smiled, offering her my hand.

She took it, squeezed it, and beamed up at me. “I called Mrs. Kessler. She’s coming.”

I straightened my tie first, then my cuffs. “She said handsome, not gorgeous?”

“She should have said ‘hot’, Mr. Roth.” She smiled big. “Or edible.”

I arched an eyebrow for her. “Thank you,” I said as I saw Helene trotting toward me. I had never seen her move so fast, and from the stunned looks of people leaning out of their offices, frozen as she passed them in the hall, I was not the only one who was surprised.

“I didn’t know she could run.”

“I didn’t know she would,” I sighed, opening my arms.

Helene rushed past the cute little receptionist and flung herself into my arms. It was wildly unprofessional, which meant the display came right from the heart.

“Who knew you liked me this much,” I chuckled as I held her.

She squeezed tighter so I understood.

WALKING into my brownstone after six that evening, I opened the door and was hit by the heavenly smell of garlic. I realized instantly that I was starving. Lunch had been at noon, and even though I had not planned to stay all day, I had ended up doing it anyway.

“Hello,” I called out.

Joe leaned out of the kitchen. “Hey.”

I dropped my keys on the shelf, locked the door behind me, and put my laptop bag on the couch as I passed it on my way to him.

He smiled at me as I walked up to him. “How was your day, baby?”

I slid my hand around the back of his neck, stroking over his nape before I tipped his head back so I could kiss him. “Long. Yours?”

“Hectic, but I wanna hear everything about your first day back.”

I took his hand and led him back into our large, newly renovated kitchen. Joe had put all his energy into the house while I was missing, and the improvements, ordered by him, supervised by Julian, were extensive and

stunning. All the new stainless steel appliances, especially the refrigerator big enough that Joe could hide in it, were amazing. “What’d you make?”

“Roast chicken, garlic mashed potatoes, steamed broccoli with fennel, and salad. I hope that’s okay.”

“Jesus, Joe, of course it’s okay. I don’t deserve you.”

“Sure you do,” he assured me, lifting his chin for another kiss that I willingly bestowed.

After I changed, we had dinner and sat at the table and told each other about our days, the friends, the crazy people, and the little things that didn’t matter to anyone else. While I was doing the dishes and he was drying, he told me that he’d gotten an e-mail from Shane earlier that day.

“Oh? What did it say?” I was interested.

“Can I say first that you need to fix the voice-activated software on my laptop.”

“Why’s that?”

“Ryan thought it would be funny to screw with it, so now every time I read e-mail it gets read to me by some Eastern European call girl.”

My iced tea went down the wrong hole.

“It’s not funny, Marcus.”

“No, not at all.”

He growled at me.

“Tell me what Shane said,” I chuckled.

“Oh, well, he told me that he was sorry for everything from being so weak that a witch could possess him—that wouldn’t have happened to one of you guys?”

“No,” I told him. “And it wasn’t possession. She made a doppelganger and inhabited it, but still, if you know yourself, if you’re confident, a clone cannot be made. It’s too hard.”

“Oh.”

“Go on.”

“Well, he just said that he was really sorry and that he wished that things could have been different with us.”

“What else?”

Joe arched one beautiful, thick eyebrow for me. “That if I ever left you, to please let him be the first call I made.”

I leaned sideways and sucked his ear lobe into my mouth, inhaling at the same time. “You’re never leaving me.” My voice rumbled deep in my chest.

“No,” he agreed, holding onto the counter as he shivered.

Six years—it had officially changed while I was gone—and the man still got weak in the knees when I kissed him. I was so lucky.

When I was done with the kitchen, I flipped off the light and just stood there a minute watching him. He was folding laundry that he’d done earlier and was listening to some baseball game that was on TV.

“Marcus,” he called over to me distractedly. “Remember tomorrow night is that charity benefit Ryan’s hosting, so you have to pick up both of our tuxedos from the cleaner’s before three and be home no later than five.”

“Yes, dear.”

He grunted, immersed in what he was listening to.

I went into the bedroom, and after awhile, he poked his head in.

“Whatcha doin’?”

“Crossword.”

“I can turn off the TV. We can play cards or something.”

“Nah.”

He slid into the room. “You want something for dessert?”

“Like?”

“I dunno. We could take a walk for ice cream or pie or—”

“No, I’m good here.”

“You feel okay?”

“Yeah, just sore.”

“We could go get a drink.”

“You drank enough the other day,” I reminded him.

He flipped me off, and I started laughing.

“We could call some friends, go out if you want.”

“You wanna do that?”

“Not particularly, but I will.”

I yawned. “That doesn’t sound real good.”

“So what, then?”

“Baby,” I smiled at him. “You’re not here to entertain me. You know that.”

“I know. I just don’t wanna take you for granted.”

“You’re not. I’m home. I’m safe, so are you. We’re fine.” He looked good in his jeans and a rugby shirt. “We’ll find our old rhythm. Don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried.”

“But listen, I don’t expect you to cook every night all of a sudden.”

“No, I know, but I like cooking for you, and you appreciate it, and talking while we do the dishes is probably one of my favorite things in the whole wide world.”

“You’re very easy to please.”

“No, I’m not. You’re the only one that I want to do this stuff with.”

“Come here.”

“What?”

“I was gonna attack you later when you came to bed, but could you just pretend it’s later and let me have you now?” I grinned slowly, dropping the newspaper and the mechanical pencil I was using to do the crossword on the floor.

“Uh yeah,” he laughed, climbing onto the bed.

I reached out for the collar of his shirt. “I missed you today.”

“Bullshit. You were too busy to miss me.”

“I wasn’t, I swear. I missed you.”

“That’s kind of romantic, huh?”

“Don’t get used to it. Just kiss me.”

He chuckled against my lips before I grabbed him, rolled him over onto his back under me, and kissed him breathless. When I was sure I had him at my mercy, I went to work on his clothes.

The bite was unexpected, hot but surprising, and I lifted up to look down at him.

“Why am I stopping?” I grumbled irritably because I just wanted to take his clothes off and ravish him, and why was he being difficult?

“I just—” He took a shuddering breath, “—love you, is all.”

“Yeah, I love you too,” I said quickly, bending to reclaim his mouth. I got his chin.

“Marcus!” he squealed.

I growled at him.

“I’m serious.” He started laughing. “Stop being an ass.”

I whined loudly, taking his face in my hands. “I love you too, baby, more than anything. You’re my whole life. Now can I please just do you?”

His face was alight with happiness, and his eyes, the beautiful pale blue I was a slave to, were dancing. “Yes, Marcus, I’m all yours.”

It was always nice to be reminded.

About the Author

MARY CALMES currently lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, with her husband and two children and hopes to eventually move off the rock to a place where her children can experience fall and even winter. She graduated from the University of the Pacific (ironic) in Stockton, California, with a bachelor's degree in English literature. Due to the fact that it is English lit and not English grammar, do not ask her to point out a clause for you, as it will so not happen. She loves writing, becoming immersed in the process, and falling into the work. She can even tell you what her characters smell like. She works at a copy store but has been unable to incorporate that into a book... yet. She also buys way too many books on Amazon.